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THE SIGNAL OF SEVEN SHOTS

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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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The Signal of Seven Shots;

OR,

Nick Carter's Struggle for His Life.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF RENA PAYSON.

There was great excitement in the palace of Raja Gahnmahr-Bhopal.

Servants ran hither and thither, carrying out orders that were hastily given them, in the vain hope that some trace of an explanation of the mystery might be discovered; but only to return for further orders after a fruitless search.

Princess Deehra, the raja's eldest daughter, was prostrated with grief and refused to be consoled, and, figuratively speaking, there was weeping and wailing and grief most profound throughout the great building.

The cause of it all was that Rena Payson, wife of Herbert Payson, was missing from her chamber to which she had retired a little before midnight, just past.

That she had not gone away voluntarily, or even willingly, was apparent at a glance, for the bed upon which she had been lying was partly dismantled of its clothing; a chair that had stood near the head of it had been overturned, and there was a splash of blood upon one of the pillows; not a large or very significant one, but, nevertheless, a splash of blood.

A window which gave out upon a magnificent flower-garden, and which extended from floor to ceiling, was wide open, and, clinging to the sill, there had been found a strip of silk, torn from Mrs. Payson's night-robe.

Mrs. Payson had only arrived at the palace at noon of the preceding day, and she had been accompanied to India by a considerable party, which included Nick Carter, Patsy and his wife, Adelina, Inspector Henderson, of Scotland Yard, in London, Sir Robert and Lady Mildred Maitland, and, of course, her husband, Herbert Payson.

Some months previously the raja's wonderful ruby, which had been in his family more than a thousand years, and which was known about all over the world by its name, "The Goddess' Heart," had been mysteriously stolen; and it had developed that wealthy Rena Payson, possessed of an inordinate passion for all precious stones, had plotted and planned until she had been able, while a guest at the palace, to obtain it.*

She had not done this with any thought of gain, for she was in her own right many times a millionaire, as was

*Read No. 584 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "A Million Dollars Reward."

her husband also; she had only desired to possess the wonderful ruby, of which there was not its equal in the world; for Rena Payson was of that strange temperament denominated a "gem-worshiper."

The possession of jewels, hoarded away in secret where she might go to them alone and worship them, was a mania with her, and she had occupied fourteen years of her life in her designs to obtain possession of "The Goddess' Heart."

Remorse had, however, overtaken her almost at once, and, although Nick Carter had succeeded in tracing the theft to her, and was on his way to recover the jewel from her, she, in fact, was en route to India to return the ruby to its owner when he encountered her.

They had arrived together at the palace, accompanied as has been already stated, at noon of the preceding day; and that evening Rena Payson had made her confession to the old raja and the members of his family; a complete and unreserved confession, at the end of which the grand old man had placed his hand on her head and forgiven her.

She had been led away to her room by Princess Deehra, between eleven and twelve o'clock, and an hour or so later the other members of the party had retired.

The suite occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Payson adjoined that of the princess, the room occupied by Rena being immediately next to it. Then there was a dressing-room, too, and then came the room in which Herbert Payson slept; and then the parlor of the suite.

During the night, not a sound out of the ordinary had been heard in or about the palace; and it was only when Herbert had finally gone into his wife's room to rouse her, thinking that she was oversleeping, that her absence was discovered.

He gave the alarm at once, for the condition of the bedclothing and the stain of blood on the pillow, the open window and the strip of silk clinging to it, all told him that something untoward had happened.

Unfortunately for them, Nick Carter had risen very early that morning—at the peep of day, in fact—and had started for a long walk across country to call upon an old friend of his, one Major John Trevanion, of the British Army, who occupied a bungalow ten miles away and not far from the flourishing town of Bhopal, which took its name from the raja's estate. He had left word with a servant at the door of the palace that he would not return until toward noon, at which time he would endeavor to bring the major back with him.

The detective had a double incentive to his act that morning; a triple one, indeed.

In the first place, he was fond of Jack Trevanion and wished very much to see him again; in the second, he desired the walk and the exercise that came from it, after his long time on railways and steamships; and in the third, he wished to be the first to announce to Trevanion that Mrs. Payson, who had been known and loved as Imogene Darling, was at the palace with her husband.

Nick did not think it was fair that Trevanion should be suddenly brought face to face with the woman he had worshiped so devoutly; and the detective wished to tell his friend the whole story of the lost ruby, and about Imogene Darling, so that he would not only hear it exactly as it was, but in order that he might be spared the pain of having it blurted out at him by some unfeeling person who could not know of his heart-interest in the woman.

And so it happened that while the palace was in an uproar over the disappearance of Rena—her given names were Imogene Reina, although she was called Rena by her intimates—the detective was quietly breakfasting with his friend, ten miles away, in utter ignorance of what had happened.

"I felt it incumbent upon me, Jack, to get over here as early as possible this morning, and tell you all about it," he said, as soon as the tale was finished. "I thought it was only due to you that you should know the simple truth about her; that you should be informed of her presence and of the fact that her husband is with her."

"It was wonderfully good of you, old chap," the major replied. "You know, of course, that it was solely my own fault I fell in love with her. She never gave me the slightest encouragement. In fact, she always discouraged me, just as she did the others who were as hard hit as I was. I think that is why I loved her so—I'll be frank—why I still love her; because she's so jolly square. Why, Nick, the only thing on earth that one could suggest in criticism of her, is the fact that she chose to keep secret the truth that she was already a married woman, and to pass under her maiden name; for I take it that she did intend to pass under her maiden name, and that it was ourselves who changed Dowling into Darling. She merely let it go."

The detective nodded.

"Rena is a thoroughly good woman, Jack," he said. "Her one fault is the mania that possesses her for jewels and precious stones; and I think now she is cured of that. You will find that Herbert is a cracking good chap, too."

"I haven't a doubt of it, old man, and I am prepared to like him down to the ground. I hope you don't think that I'm one of the sort to resent the fact that he won her for his own long before I ever saw her?"

"Not at all. I left word at the palace that I would bring you back with me. Will you go over?"

"Sure I will."

"My second assistant, Patsy, who is also my adopted son, is with us, and has his wife with him. Two old friends of yours, Colonel Sir Robert Bell Maitland and Lady Mildred, are of the party——"

"What? Dear old Bob Maitland?"

"Yes; and also Inspector Henderson, of Scotland Yard."

"You don't say. I used to know Henderson, too. He served in the army once, before he went into the police and became attached to Scotland Yard."

The two lingered long over their breakfast, for they had many things to talk over; and they were just rising from the table when a horse, covered with foam, galloped up to the door, and the youngest son of the raja threw himself from the saddle and ran into the house.

"What is it, Khotal?" demanded Trevanion instantly, for he saw from the frightened face of the young man that something startling had happened.

"It is Imogene," he gasped excitedly—Rena was better known by her first name than by her second one, among her Indian friends. "She has disappeared from her room in the palace. There was blood on the pillow where her head had rested. The bed was torn apart. The window was open and a bit torn from her nightrobe was clinging to it, where she had been carried past it. She is gone. Some one has stolen her away. Perhaps she is murdered. We do not know. My father sent me at once for Mr. Carter. Please come; both of you!"

He spoke in good English, although rather incoherently; but he had said enough for both the men who listened to him, to understand what had happened.

"Have you horses, Jack?" asked Nick quickly.

"Yes. Two of them, and good ones, too."

"Then let us lose no time. Khotal, your horse will not stand a hard run back to the palace, so you had better take it easy on your return. You can do nothing to assist us, at once, anyhow, so take your time. Come, Jack, if you are ready."

In less time than it takes to tell of it, the saddles were thrown upon the horses and the two men were galloping along the road toward the palace of the raja.

Both were strangely silent as they proceeded on their way.

There was little opportunity for talking during that rapid run, but each was busy with his own thoughts, and it is likely that not much would have been said just then, under any circumstances.

It was ten miles straight away, with a good road which ascended gradually as they advanced; but they covered it in a little less than fifty minutes.

Herbert Payson was the first to greet Nick as he dismounted.

He came forward with his face white and drawn, but, nevertheless, he was outwardly cool and self-contained.

"I am so glad you are here, Nick," he said. "You seem just now like a mountain of strength to me—to all of us. My own idea is that it is merely an abduction, and that the blood on the pillow is not Rena's. However——"

"We will look into that in a moment, Herbert. Here, I want you to know Jack Trevanion. You will be good friends, I'm sure. Princess Deehra, my dear young lady, have you forgotten that you are the daughter of a hundred rajas? Dry those tears. Let us have courage, not despair. Half the battle is won with faith, the other half by self-help. Ah, prince, it seems that we have to face a new difficulty this morning; but I'm sure that we will surmount it speedily. Inspector Henderson and you, Patsy, will you be so good as to come with me to Mrs. Payson's rooms? I will ask the others to remain here until we return."

And so the detective passed on into the palace, toward the room from which Rena Payson had disappeared.

CHAPTER II.

THE SEARCH THROUGH THE PALACE.

The Scotland Yard inspector had been thoughtful enough to demand that everything should be left undisturbed until Nick Carter arrived upon the scene, and, therefore, the detective found all things the same as if he had been first to view them.

When he entered the room he called out to the others to wait a moment at the threshold, and then he followed out his favorite method of stepping to the center of the room and from there turning slowly as if he were on a pivot, while his eyes took in everything, no matter how minute, that was within the range of his vision.

He began at the window where it was evident the abductors had entered the room; he followed the course they must have pursued from there to the bedside; he studied the appearance of the bed, but without approaching it as yet; his eyes rested for a moment upon the door of a large closet that was closed; then they passed on around the room until they returned again to the window.

"Inspector," he said, "I wish you would look inside that closet and tell me what you find. Patsy, go outside to the ground underneath that window. There has been some sort of a rope, or a rope ladder, fastened to the sill. The marks are there now, and there should be some sort of marks on the ground under the window, or near it."

Then he stepped over to the bed and examined the blood-stain on the pillow-case.

It was, perhaps, half the size of a woman's palm, and was irregular in shape; and yet it had been ground into the linen of the pillow-case, as if by a pressure; it did not have the appearance of being spilt; in one spot it was somewhat clotted.

He raised his eyes as the inspector stepped out of the closet again.

"Well, Henderson, what do you find?" he asked.

"It looks as if a hurricane had struck that closet," he said. "I should say that hands not accustomed to handling women's garments have been at work there."

The detective nodded.

"That is what I supposed," he said. "It is unfortunate that Mrs. Payson took this trip without her maid, otherwise we could tell what is missing. But the abductors have probably taken the first things they could lay their hands upon, without much regard to what they happened to be. They merely wanted clothing for the lady. You might go through those trunks now, if you like. I mean by that, of course, that you are simply to examine them."

As soon as the lids were thrown back, it was evident that the detective had spoken correctly.

It could be seen that the contents of the trunks had been literally dumped upon the floor, and that from the heaps certain things had been selected, after which what remained had been crammed back into the trunks, helter skelter.

"Go down, inspector, please, and ask Mr. Payson to come here," said the detective. And then, while he was alone, he stepped over to the window and studied it carefully for several moments.

He picked up a bit of clay from the floor, and near it he found a sprig of evergreen. It was not larger than his thumb-nail, but it was evergreen.

Next he gave rather closer attention to the marks upon the window-sill where the hooks had been fastened and had made a slight indentation, although it was evident that they had been wrapped in rags to prevent that very thing.

On the window-sill he found another tiny spot where a drop of blood had fallen, and on the casing beside the window, just where a man might rest his hand for an instant in climbing through it, there was a faint smear; almost too faint to be noticed.

Patsy was below, searching the ground, and Nick called out to him:

"Find anything, Patsy?"

"Yes. There are tracks here. They are not very distinct, but they are tracks, and they were made some time during the night, or early morning."

"What sort of tracks?"

"One of the men wore shoes, like a white man, or a European, at least. The other two——"

"What? Were there three of them?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"By the tracks I have been able to find."

"Well, leave them as they are without disturbing them. Go yourself, and if you cannot follow the tracks, make a series of half-circles away from that side of the house, each one spreading out a little farther than the last, and see if you can pick up the trail again. I will come down and have a look at them myself, in a moment."

He turned back into the room, for at that moment Herbert Payson entered it with the inspector.

"Herbert," said the detective, "I wish you would go through those trunks and the closet over yonder, and tell me as nearly as you can what is missing."

"I'm afraid I won't be very exact. I haven't much idea of what my wife owns in the way of clothing."

"I suppose not; but you will be able to assist a little. And I don't care so much about the clothing. I want to know if there has been robbery as well as abduction. Find out if her jewels are missing, and, if she had any money in her possession, see if that is gone."

"I will do that, all right."

"I'll leave you here to attend to that. The inspector will assist you. I must go outside for a moment."

When he reached the spot under the window, he could see Patsy at work just beyond, following out the directions his chief had given him; then he gave his attention to the faint marks on the ground.

For the better part of half an hour he remained there upon his knees most of the time, examining the ground beneath the window; and here, in addition to the footprints he examined, he discovered another spot of blood upon the grass. It was of about the same size and character as the one on the window-ledge.

He tried to follow the tracks from the window, in the direction the men had taken with their prisoner, but here he was foiled again.

He saw, however, that Patsy was correct in stating the number of marauders to be three.

After a while he went and spoke to Patsy.

"Found anything more yet, Patsy?" he asked.

"Not a thing."

"Well, keep it up. I am going back into the house for a moment."

Returning to the palace, he made straight for the room in which the whole party had been seated during the evening, but he only went from one window to another in that room, and remained for several moments gazing out of each one, apparently studying the landscape that stretched away for endless miles before him, until it was lost in the slopes of the gradually rising hills in the distance.

Without uttering a word to anybody, although many curious and anxious eyes were bent upon him, he passed out of the house again and made straight for an arbor of roses that faced the palace, thirty rods distant.

Here, he presently uttered an expression of gratification, for he had found what he sought.

In the soft earth behind the arbor there were footprints, and they had been made by the same persons who had stood beneath the window of Rena's room.

One of the pairs of feet were shod; the other two were naked.

There were imprints upon the soft earth, also, where,

from time to time, some of the members of the party had sat down to rest while another watched through that window the room where the raja's guests had passed the evening.

He was able to trace the footprints for a considerable distance backward from the rose-bower, but then he lost them again.

Presently he called to Patsy, and when the assistant approached, he said to him:

"Here is where they stood, during most of the evening, watching us while we were in the blue room. They went from here to the window, so it isn't necessary to keep up the work you are doing now."

"I suppose they simply waited here until we all went to bed, eh?" said Patsy.

"Yes. They must have posted themselves early in the evening, for it looks as if they were here a long time."

"There doesn't seem to be much use in trying to follow their tracks across the grounds. They haven't left enough marks for an eagle to see, let alone a man."

"No; I was in hopes that the man who was shod carried Rena from the house, but he evidently passed her over to the barefooted men. Still, we must discover, if possible, the place where they fastened their horses."

"Their horses?"

"Certainly. They didn't come here to steal her away without bringing some sort of conveyance; and, if they brought any at all, it would have been horses; or, at least, one horse. And if they brought a horse or horses, they must have left the animals somewhere during all the time they were watching that window, and afterward engaged in the abduction. I'll have a try at the landscape again."

He climbed up the side of the arbor, unmindful of the thorns, and from the point of vantage thus obtained gazed intently around him on every side.

After a few minutes he descended.

"Patsy," he said, "over yonder, about a quarter of a mile, there is a grove of trees that looks to be a likely place, if they came from that direction. And over there, toward the mountains, there is a high mass of rocks—something like what we would call a little butte if we were in Montana—where they would, I think, have left the horses if they came from that direction. It is the most likely place, too, for I suppose they must have come from the hills."

"I should say so, chief."

"Well, go and examine both places. Take the rocks first, as the most likely place. If you don't find traces of them in either, look for another likely spot, and keep looking till you find the right one. When you have found it, come and notify me."

Returning to the great house, he hurried to Rena's room, where he found Adelina assisting Payson at his task. The inspector had disappeared.

"Well," he said, "what have you to tell me?"

"Every jewel that my wife had with her is missing," replied Herbert; "as is also all the money she had in her possession—about a hundred pounds in English bank-notes and gold."

"Anything else?"

"Considerable of her clothing. It seems to have been selected with a fairly good knowledge of a woman's requirements, too, Nick; according to what Adelina says."

The detective nodded his head emphatically.

"I thought so," he said. "Where is the inspector?"

"He went out a few moments ago. He said something about having an idea, and hurried away, calling back as he went that he would return before you wanted him. He went out——"

"He went out through the window, didn't he?" asked Nick, smiling.

"Yes; but how did you know that?"

"I can see the marks of his boots down there on the sod where he took a flying leap to the ground. I shouldn't wonder if he did have an idea, or else he saw something which he wished to investigate without delay. Have you finished here?"

"Yes."

"Then come down-stairs where we can talk it over."

CHAPTER III.

THE VENGEANCE OF FANATICS.

He led the way into the room where they had all passed the preceding evening, and they all followed him silently.

Sir Robert stepped across to the fireplace and stood leaning against it with his glass stuck into his eye, a picture of stolid English eagerness to do "something," but perfectly self-contained until it could be done. His wife stood beside him, eager, breathless, anxious almost to tears.

Princess Deehra clung to her father, who stood straight and tall, white-bearded and calm, beside his chair. Prince Kairha and his brother Khotal stood near them. Trevanion was close beside the detective.

Herbert Payson remained in the doorway, with clouded brow and pale, drawn face.

"My friends," said the detective, coming straight to the point, "the abductors were three in number, one of the three being a woman. She——"

"A woman!" exclaimed Deehra.

"Yes, Princess. I will tell you how I know, presently. They arrived in the vicinity of the palace during the evening—I should say about ten o'clock, and took their stand under the rose-bower out yonder, to watch this room, where we were seated, until we should all retire for the night.

"They brought with them either a rope ladder or a knotted rope to which hooks, bound in cloth or rags, were attached. One of the hooks left its mark upon the window-ledge, notwithstanding the precautions that had been taken to prevent it.

"Doubtless they waited a long time at the rose-bower, after the party had retired, in order to give time for every one to be soundly asleep; or it may be that the princess and Rena—or Imogene, as you call her—remained together talking for a time after the others had gone to bed."

"We did so," said the princess. "About an hour, I should think."

"When they believed the time was propitious, they approached the house. The woman stood under the window of Rena's room while one of the barefooted men with her got upon her shoulders. Then he assisted the third one up, and he in turn mounted to the other man's shoulders, and in that way the hook or hooks were attached to the window-ledge.

"I suppose you would like to be assured that I am certain of this, so I will tell you how I know it."

"Please do," murmured the princess.

"The woman wore shoes; the men were not shod. The woman had taken for the occasion an old pair of men's shoes, English made. She did that to disguise the size of her feet, and to make it appear that she was a man. Doubtless she was also dressed as a man. I know that the shoes were English by the shape of the heels, and I know that the woman stood under the window and supported the weight of the two men while they climbed upon her shoulders, by the depth and character of the imprint her feet made there; also by the marks of bare heels where they alighted upon the sod when the men leaped down from her shoulders.

"As soon as the knotted rope or ladder was in place, it was the woman who mounted to the room and entered it; but her companions evidently followed her closely, for they appear to have been inside the room when they were wanted.

"I think that the woman first tried to stupefy Rena with some drug, possibly chloroform; but she must have awakened before it was accomplished, and have struck out wildly with her hands, for the woman who forced her way into the room received a blow on her nose which caused it to bleed, and which accounts for the blood we found upon the pillow. That blood did not come from Mrs. Payson; it was shed by the woman who abducted her.

"There was a struggle before Rena was overpowered, but it could not last long with two men to hold her while the other applied the stupefying drug. She was taken out through the window then, and carried away to some place where horses must have been in waiting. Patsy is now searching for that place, and when it is found we will be able to judge correctly, I hope, the direction the abductors took when they escaped."

"But why should they have abducted her at all?" burst from Herbert Payson.

"That," replied Nick, "is a question to which I am not yet able to give a reply; but I think there is an answer which we can presently find. On the face of it, viewed from the only vantage-grounds we have at hand, there are only three logical solutions to the engima."

"What are they, Mr. Carter?" asked the old raja.

"One is that they made a mistake in the person they abducted. I have thought it might be possible that they came here for the princess, and merely got into the wrong apartments. It being dark, they might not have discovered their error until they were some distance away from the house."

"No," said the old raja, shaking his head emphatically. "That is not the answer. They did not come here after my daughter. They came for Mrs. Payson—for Imogene, as we must call her, for that is how we know her."

"I had thought," said Nick, "that it might be possible that you had an enemy somewhere who would take that method of revenging himself upon you, Prince."

"No. I have no such enemy. Deehra is loved almost to idolatry, through the length and breadth of this part of the land. They would not come here to take her away. What is another reason, Mr. Carter?"

"The great wealth of Herbert Payson and his wife is probably known to persons in this country. There arises the question of ransom. The whole thing may be a species of banditti work, and if so, we will presently receive a communication demanding an enormous ransom."

Again the raja shook his head with emphasis.

"It is not that, either, Mr. Carter," he said. "No such thing as that has ever been heard of in this part of India. No; it is not that. What is the third reason you have in mind?"

"It has occurred to me that the abduction might be the work of a fanatic," said Nick quietly; and all who heard him knew by the sound of his voice and the expression of his eyes that this was the answer he favored most. He saw the raja nod his head, too, as he expressed that reason.

"A fanatic?" said Trevanion. "What do you mean by that?"

The detective fixed his eyes on his friend for a moment before replying. Then he said slowly, but with emphasis:

"Back yonder, in the center of this palace, is an apartment that is called the Sacred Room. It is so called because it contains a treasure which is regarded as something sacred by every man, woman, and child who lives under the dominion of the raja. Eight months ago, or very nearly that, the treasure—I refer, of course, to the

ruby—was taken from that Sacred Room and carried away to another country; and it was taken by one who is not of the same religious faith as these people.

"That act, committed by Rena Payson, was, and is now, I believe, looked upon by these people as a defilement; as an unforgivable offense. Yesterday, at noon, or soon after, it was given out in the palace—and of course the news spread throughout the country rapidly—that the ruby had been returned. No doubt it got out also that it had been taken by a woman who used to visit here often—Imogene Darling as they knew her; Rena Payson as we know her to be.

"One moment, please," as the baronet was about to interrupt. "If my theory is correct, I believe there should have been four persons concerned in that abduction, instead of three; for the fourth should have been concealed somewhere within the palace to overhear Rena's confession, *and*, what is more important, the raja's forgiveness.

"If my theory is correct, had there been no forgiveness, but had the raja administered severe punishment, there would have been no abduction. Those who came here prepared to carry Rena away with them would have gone away empty-handed, satisfied that the raja would take his revenge for the wrong that had been done him, and, through him, to all his people.

"But if there was a fourth person here, with listening ears, to hear that confession, and the forgiveness that followed it, that person was here with the other three we know about, to see to it that punishment was administered in case the raja failed in what they consider to be his duty."

Again the raja nodded his head.

"I think you are right, Mr. Carter," he said calmly. "I think you have hit upon the only logical reason why this outrage was committed. I know my people, and I know that, while they might force their way into my house for some such fanatical reason as the one you name, they would never dare to do it for any of the others you have thought of.

"I will say to you all," he continued, "that the great ruby is regarded by these people with much more superstitious awe than you imagine. To them it is the healer of all ill, the source of all blessings, the heart of a deity whom they worship in secret.

"If in their zeal they decided that the one who took that ruby from this palace, and, as you express it, defiled the Sacred Room—if they decided that that person should be punished for that act, nothing, not even my personal order, could avoid the consequences of such a decision. Even my own house servants might conspire to carry out such a decree as that, believing in their fanaticism that they were fully justified in going against the wishes of their ruler—myself.

"They would argue among themselves that I had been bewitched by the beauty of the woman to forgive her. They would regard it as a weakness, and they would take it out of my hands if they could, and consider that they were justified in doing so."

"But, Prince," Herbert Payson cried out, taking a step forward as he did so, "what would they do to her? What would they do to my wife?"

"Alas! my dear sir, I cannot tell. I only know that we must lose no time in effecting a rescue. Fanatics are as immovable in their decisions as rocks."

"Would they murder her?"

"That is a hard question to answer, Mr. Payson."

"Answer it; would they murder her?"

"They might; but I think not at once, else they would have done so in her bed, and not carried her away into captivity."

"Would they torture her?"

"Physically, I do not think so; mentally, it is very possible. I do not think she would be injured in any way, at once, Mr. Payson. If Mr. Carter is correct respecting the motive for the crime, they would wait until a certain number of them were prepared to pass upon the case as to what should be done with the prisoner. I think that your wife will be safe for at least a day, probably two or three days; but no more; and so we must act quickly."

"But how are we to act? What are we to do? Which way are we to go? We do not know what direction they have taken."

"We must find an answer to all those questions—and we will," said the raja decidedly.

"Here is Patsy," said Nick. "Let us hear what he has to say. Well, Patsy? What now?"

"There were five horses, and four persons in that party, chief," was the reply. "The fifth horse was probably brought to carry Mrs. Payson away."

"Without doubt. Where were they tied, and which way did they go?"

"They were left out near the rock, as you supposed. They departed toward the hills."

"Have you seen Inspector Henderson anywhere about Patsy?"

"No; I have not seen him."

"Come with me, then. I will have a look at those horse-tracks, and the others near it. In the meanwhile, Prince, if you will give orders for horses for those of the party who will accompany me, we will start on the trail as soon as possible."

CHAPTER IV.

THE AWFUL FATE THAT MIGHT BE RENA'S.

Behind the pile of rocks that has been referred to, Nick Carter found where the horses had been tied while the four persons who had brought them there went about their nefarious business.

Fortunately the ground about the place was not so hard but that it had retained some very fair impressions of the footsteps of the persons who had trod there, and Nick saw, as Patsy had seen before, that there had been four of them.

Of the four, two were shod and two were not; and the shoes of those two were of the same size, though not of the same pattern.

It was also very plainly to be seen the direction in which the party had gone when they left the rock, for the tracks were easily followed for a distance of almost a mile, when they came upon a rocky roadway, and were lost to view.

But they had gone toward the hills that lay in a northwesterly direction from the rock.

Thirty or forty miles away toward the northwest there were many lesser mountains; the country was wild and uninhabited, and much cut up. The detective had no doubt that it was toward those mountains the abductors had taken their captive.

He returned to the house and told what he had discovered; then he drew the old raja aside, and said to him:

"My dear sir, it is evident to me that there was a confederate inside your palace, for I think that otherwise they would not have dared to send one of their number in here to listen."

"I have thought about that, Mr. Carter. I have no doubt of it whatever."

"Is there any way of finding out who that confederate is?"

"I am afraid not."

"Will you tell me what you think those fanatics will do with our friend when they get her away out yonder in the hills, if we do not rescue her quickly?"

"Yes; for I think I know exactly what they will do."

"Tell me what. Tell me the worst."

"You will not, of course, repeat what I say to Mr. Payson?"

"Certainly not."

"It is not unlikely that they will burn her."

"*Burn her!* What do you mean? Like our American Indians, at the stake?"

"No; but on a funeral pyre."

"Great Heaven! Do you mean that they will roast her alive as if she were a fowl?"

"Yes."

"But I cannot understand such hellish barbarity as that in a country that pretends to have the oldest civilization in the world."

"There are many people in this country, Mr. Carter, who practise still the old custom of burning the living widow or widows of a man alive with his corpse. Among those people it is also the custom to so dispose of a person who has directly offended a deity. If we are correct in our supposition that this business is the work of fanatics, then it is also true that they are carrying her away into the mountains to offer her up as a sacrifice to the angry god whom she has offended. They believe that in that way only can his wrath be propitiated."

"It is terrible! It is awful!"

"Yes; but it is also a saving clause for Imogene, Mr. Carter."

"I confess that I can see no saving clause or grace about it, prince.'

"If they are taking her to that sort of sacrifice, she is safe from all other dangers in the meanwhile. That is what I mean."

"Ah! I see."

"Not only that, but she will be well fed and cared for. They will wish her to go upon the pyre in the best of condition."

"Tell me how it will be done."

"First, then, they dig a hole in the earth; a square hole that is five or six feet in depth. At each corner of the hole a green timber that will not burn easily is placed in an upright position, and extending from one to another of those timbers are others which, in turn, support a platform, which you will see is directly over the hole in the ground."

"Yes."

"The hole is then filled with dry wood, carefully selected, in order that it will give out very little, if any, smoke; and when the dry wood is heaped up to some distance above the surface of the ground, all is in readiness for the last act."

"And what is that?"

"The person who is intended for sacrifice is brought out. In this case, our dear friend would have been disrobed by the women of the party, and carefully wrapped in sheets that have first been saturated in alum-water. In these the living woman would be tightly wrapped, every part of her head and body, save only her face, being covered.

"Around the sheets are wound turn after turn of a plaited rope, that is made of green stuff so that it will not burn readily, and then the body is ready for the sacrifice."

"It is horrible."

"There follows some sort of a ceremony which occupies about an hour, and after that the procession is formed, and the person intended for sacrifice is borne to the funeral pyre.

"When the platform that I have described is reached, the living body is placed upon it, after which the participators in the ceremony form a circle around the platform, chanting all the time.

"This last part of the ceremony may consume from one to three hours, and then one of the number who has been selected steps forward and lights the dry wood beneath the platform.

"As the fire mounts and begins to lick its way around the edges of the platform, those who are participating in the ceremonies begin to dance around it, and to chant and shout themselves hoarse, as much to drown the shrieks of the victim as anything else. I have been told that they hold their hands to their ears in order that they may not hear, but I do not know."

"I could not have believed that such atrocities were practised in this age."

"They are rare, but they do happen."

"What next?"

"There is nothing more, save that the dance is kept up until the platform is burned away and the whole mass drops into the hole that was dug in the ground to receive it. Then, when the fire is cooled somewhat, the earth that was taken from the hole is thrown into it again, and upon the softened earth some sort of a young tree is planted. That is all."

"And that is the fate to which Rena Payson has been taken unless we can rescue her!" exclaimed the detective.

"Yes."

"Prince, is there no one in your household in whom you can trust who knows about such things, and who would be able to guide us and help us?"

"There is only one whom I believe has the knowledge, and I dare not trust him. More than likely it was he who assisted the abductors last night."

"One of the servants?"

"Yes. Jahra. He is one of my immediate servants."

"Jahra? I remember him. It was he who showed me through the palace at the time I found Rena's name cut in the glass of one of the windows with her diamond."

"Yes. The same."

"You say you dare not trust him?"

"No. I am afraid that he would purposely lead you astray. I am afraid that he might be worse than no guide at all."

"You regard him, then, as one of the fanatics?"

"I do."

"Go, please, and send him to me; or order him to come here, then let me talk with him alone. I think I may find a way to handle him."

"Pardon me if I doubt it, sir. But I think you will be better off without him."

"Nevertheless, I would like you to send him to me."

"Are you never coming, Carter?" Trevanion called from the adjoining room.

"Yes. Presently. I may seem to be wasting time, but in reality I am saving it, old man. Be as patient as you can."

Jahra came presently. He was a typical Hindu, such as one occasionally encounters in the streets of London. He was tall and handsome of feature, he carried his head loftily, and he had about him more of the air of a master than a servant.

"You wished to see me, sahib?" he asked courteously.

"Yes, Jahra," replied the detective, smiling. "You know all about the terrible thing that has happened to this household, do you not?"

"Yes."

"And you know how it has made your good master suffer that a guest of his should be taken away in the night, and carried to the mountains?"

"Yes, sahib. I know."

"Do you also know to what fate she has been taken? Do you know what will be done with her when her captors get her safely to the mountains, where they can defy approach?"

"I know; or I think I know. She will be sacrificed to the vengeance of the god she has offended."

"You do not believe that it is right to commit such horrible acts, do you, Jahra?"

"No, sahib."

"You would save her if you could?"

"Yes."

"You are a hillman yourself, I am told, and know every pathway and every gorge through the mountains to the north and northwest of here. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Jahra, listen to me. If you can guide our party to the rescue of Mrs. Payson, if you can and do take us to the mountains so that we overtake and rescue her from her captors before any harm or injury befalls her, you shall have, on your return, gold pieces to the amount of one thousand English sovereigns; and if you play us false, or wilfully mislead us, you shall suffer the same penalty of which she now stands in danger. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sahib. I understand."

"Can you guide us?"

"I can but try."

"Have you any idea now, at this moment, who her captors are?"

"I think I have. I am not sure."

"Do you also suspect what portion of the hills they would make, in order to erect the funeral pyre?"

"I think so, sahib."

"Then come; and don't forget my promise of reward—nor my promise of retribution if it should occur to you to play me false."

"I will remember, sahib," replied Jahra, with a strange smile, which the detective could not fathom.

CHAPTER V.

THE SECRET MEETING OF THE FANATICS.

There were five—without counting Jahra—in the party of horsemen that started a few minutes later toward the hills. Trevanion, Maitland, Patsy, and Prince Kairha

accompanied the detective, who rode ahead of the others, with Jahra close beside him, for he had determined that the sleek and handsome servant should not escape his vigilance for a moment.

Nothing whatever had been seen of Henderson since the moment he leaped from the window of the room from which Rena was abducted.

He had disappeared as utterly as if the earth had opened and swallowed him up when he alighted upon it.

But Nick Carter knew Henderson, and was not worrying about him. He knew that the inspector had hit upon some sort of a clue which he was following, and that he would never abandon it until he had followed it to the end, or lost it.

The manner in which he had leaped from the window, at a running jump, told the detective that the inspector had a good reason for it, and for haste as well.

The way to the mountains was broad and smooth, and it was the only route that the men they were pursuing could have followed, once they were started upon it, and so the party galloped along with entire confidence that they were on the right track.

It was not yet noon when they left the palace, and by nightfall they were well in among the lesser hills, and rapidly approaching a place named Jahlra Paten, located in a pass through the mountains where one of the feeders of the Chambal River had cut and bored its ragged course for ages.

It was here that Jahra said they must halt for the night, for he insisted that it would be inviting death to attempt to find one's way through the gorge in the mountains during the darkness of the night.

"More than that," he had urged, "if we stop there it will give me an opportunity to discover if those we are pursuing have passed that way."

"And if they have not, what then?" asked the detective.

"If they have not, we will go on in the morning and head them off by the only other route they could have taken, and which is much longer and more difficult."

"But it is a delay to stop; and what may happen to Mrs. Payson in the meantime?"

"Sahib, nothing will be done to the lady before three days. It will take all of that time for the people to gather who would witness the sacrifice," was the reply.

It was almost half an hour after dark when the party rode into the town with the double name.

It was a strange, weird sort of place, with its houses and temples and other structures built along the sides of the mountains, on either side of the gorge. They were built tier upon tier, at that, so that, looking at them in the darkness, it seemed as if one house actually stood upon the top of another.

The gorge was narrow and precipitous, and as dark as the proverbial pocket. Nick had already come to the conclusion that it would have been impossible to continue on their way in the darkness; and besides, the horses were worn out and needed rest.

But already the detective had determined upon a course which he meant to pursue after they should have found accommodations in the mountain town, and he took Patsy alone into his confidence about it.

Those who have followed the adventures of Nick Carter are thoroughly aware that this was by no means his first visit to the mountainous sections of India.

Many times his duties had taken him there, and with the result that he not only spoke the native language and many of the dialects, but he was thoroughly familiar with the habits and characteristics of the people. He proposed on this particular night to make good use of the information and knowledge he possessed.

The fact was that he did not trust Jahra; not alone because of what the old raja had said to him, but because of an inward worrying that the man would play them false in the end.

Fortunately, before leaving the palace, he had foreseen that he might have to make some such adventure as he had now planned for that night, and he had brought with him in the saddle-bags all that he required for the act.

The party had no difficulty in getting themselves housed, thanks to the volubility of Jahra—and of the money they were willing to spend. One entire family obligingly walked out of their home, and left it to the use of the travelers, probably distributing themselves around among the other houses, wherever they could be accommodated.

Food was procured after something of the same manner, and when their meal was finished, Nick called Jahra to him.

"Now," he said, "it is time for you to go and make your inquiries. When shall we expect you to return?"

"In two hours, sahib; or three, at the most."

"If you are back in four, and have accomplished what you go after, you will have done well. Now go."

Go he did; but he had no sooner passed the door than the detective leaped to his feet and began rapidly to transform himself into one of the natives.

He stained his face and neck and hands and arms; he twisted a turban upon his head, and he dressed himself in the costume he had brought with him from the palace, so that, within a few moments after the departure of Jahra, he glided away after him through the darkness, looking as much like a native as Jahra himself.

He understood, of course, that he could not have hoped to succeed in any such plan if it were daylight. He would, in that case, have been instantly recognized as a stranger in the place; but in that almost impenetrable darkness, down there in the gorge—darkness that was broken only by an occasional gleam of light through a

window or a doorway, he felt that he could go wherever he pleased with very little danger of being discovered.

His first care was, of course, to discover where Jahra had gone, and to follow him; but he had stumbled around through the gorge and up both sides of it for almost an hour before he found any trace of the man at all; and even then it was a happy accident that gave him the information he sought.

He met and almost collided in the darkness with a man like himself—that is, one who was dressed almost exactly like himself; and Nick uttered a rather surly "good evening," in the language of the place.

To this there was instant response. The man before him had evidently thought he recognized the voice of the man who had so nearly run into him, for he called him by a name that Nick had never heard before.

"Are you not going?" he asked Nick, still supposing him to be another.

"Going? And where?" asked Nick, still in a low, surly tone, for he found that it served him.

"You have not heard?" was the next question.

"No."

"Ah, you are behind the times. You have been away in the mountains again, Sindahr. But I forget. You only appear in the night-time now, since the reward of the English is out for you. There is to be a sacrifice, near the Temple of Gemini. And you have not heard?"

"No. When is it to be?"

"It is fixed for the day after to-morrow, at sunrise. You should attend. It will be a grand spectacle, for the sacrifice is offered by a white woman of the north, and she is wondrously beautiful, they tell me. She it was who stole 'The Goddess' Heart' from the casket of onyx, in the Sacred Room at the palace."

"When and how was the time fixed, and where is the woman for sacrificing?" asked Nick.

"It was all decided upon quickly. It was thought that the raja would forgive her for the great sin, and word was sent out to make ready. Last night she was taken from the palace, and to-day, under guard, she passed through here toward the Temple of Gemini. It was our good Jahra who arranged for her capture."

"When do you start?" was Nick's next question.

"Within an hour. We meet at the white rock. It is very secret. Will you go?"

"No; but yet—perhaps. At the white rock, you say; and within an hour?"

"Yes."

"Does Jahra go with you?"

"No. He leads a rescue-party. They are to be taken into the mountains and lost."

"They will murder Jahra when they find that he has deceived them. I know the sahibs."

"Jahra will find a way to take care of himself; never fear about that. Good night."

The man passed on his way in the darkness, and Nick pretended to go in the opposite direction; but almost instantly he turned and hurried after the other, keeping track of him only by the slight noise of his light footfalls on the traveled pathway, for it was now so dark in the gorge that one could not see a hand before one's face.

They wound through the lower street for a considerable distance, then mounted to a higher one—for it has already been explained that the town was built on terraces.

From there they mounted to another one that was still higher, and so on until the detective, remembering as best he could, judged that they were upon the highest of all.

There were times when he had to hold back, when a ray of sharp light clove the darkness from an open slit of a window, and once he was very nearly betrayed by the sudden opening of a door directly abreast of him.

Fortunately, however, he escaped detection, and did not lose the man he was following.

When the topmost street was reached, the way led along it until they had passed beyond the region of houses; and then, suddenly, Nick lost the sound of the footfalls of the man ahead of him, knowing nothing of where he had gone.

He waited a moment, and then crept forward cautiously, dropping upon his hands and knees, the better to feel his way along, for he had discovered in the last few minutes that the route they were traversing was getting narrower with each step.

He knew the man he followed could not have turned back without passing him, and that he could not have passed without his knowledge, and so he kept on until the ledge upon which he crept was scarcely wide enough for a mountain-goat; and the depths below it he did not attempt to speculate about.

At last, when he was almost in despair lest he had passed the place of meeting, he saw a glimmer of light ahead of him; and a moment later he rounded a sharp turn, and came upon a scene which startled him.

Beside him, so close that he touched it, loomed an enormous white rock, towering two hundred feet, at least, in the air. Beyond him, straight ahead as he turned, was the sheer cliff of the mountainside, reaching straight upward through the darkness until lost to view. It was probably a thousand feet or more to the top of it.

And these two, the cliff and the white rock, stood at right angles to each other, and between them was a flat, triangular-shaped, rocky platform that might have been half an acre in extent.

Near the center of this strange place a huge fire was blazing brightly, and squatted around it, with their arms

clasping their knees, were between two and threescore natives, turbaned and shrouded in their strange costumes, dark of feature, forbidding of aspect, and solemn of mien.

And in the very center of this strange group stood Jahra, engaged in making a speech of some sort to them.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRELIGHT COUNCIL AT MIDNIGHT.

The arrival of the man whom Nick had followed had evidently interrupted the proceedings for a moment, but they speedily went onward again, and Jahra continued his impassioned speech.

He was telling the story of the theft of the ruby, and Nick could not but admit that he told it well and graphically.

"She came, this beautiful woman from the West," he was saying when Nick got near enough to hear and understand the words, "with the sin she intended to commit already fully developed in her heart. She came with all the graces and allurements of Evil, and with her plans so well formed that it only required time and patience to carry them out.

"She came under a false name; a name as false as her heart was to Good.

"There was a storm—a wild storm among the lower hills one day, and this beautiful white woman from the West went boldly out into it, in order that she might be caught and her life endangered. Do you know why? It was so that she might throw herself upon the mercy of the grand old raja and his family, and so get to know them; and so get to be invited to the palace; and so get to be one of the honored guests of the Princess Deehra.

"And what did she then? Ah, she played her part so well that she taught the princess and her father to love her; she taught even Prince Kairha to love her, and were it not for his sworn oath that he will not mix the blood, he would long ago have sought her for wife; and even now, and until the day of his death, Kairha will be an unhappy prince because of his love for the devil-woman."

This was news to Nick, but, somehow, he did not doubt it.

"That was thirteen years ago," Jahra continued solemnly. "See how deftly she worked. She had determined, years before that, that some day she would possess 'The Goddess' Heart,' and to that end she now worked harder than ever, since she was already within the walls of the palace where it was kept.

"There were six keys that she had to use to get to the great ruby, and to obtain these she pretended to be a sorceress; to tell fate from an amulet, or from something a person had carried about with them, and which was fast to them by a metal chain.

"By such a subterfuge as that she managed to hold the six keys, one after another, tightly clasped in the palm of her right hand; but all the while there was wax in that hand, and as she held the key she obtained an impression of it.

"This woman—this wonderfully beautiful white woman from the West, who stole the ruby—consumed six years in obtaining the impressions of the keys alone. Six years for that part of her plot alone. Was she not patient? And does she not deserve all the glory and purification that fire can give to her?"

There was a guttural murmur of approval along the line of listeners.

"Even then she went away and waited still another year before she used her keys. You ask me for what she waited? I will tell you. She waited for the approach of Princess Deehra's birthday, when she knew the ruby would be exposed to view, when she knew it would be worn over the princess' heart for an hour, and when she knew that many months would elapse before it would again be on view.

"And then she returned to India again, knowing well the date of the birthday; knowing well that she would be invited to attend the festivities; knowing that it would be her very best chance of all to play the last act of the drama she had plotted.

"What did she then? you will ask of me. I will tell you. How got she past the guard at the door of the Sacred Room? you will ask of me. I will tell you.

"She retired to her room when others went to theirs; but a little later, when the palace was still, and when most of the inmates were sleeping, she roused herself and slowly descended the wide staircase and passed through the wide corridors, in her night-robe, and as one who walks in her sleep. Thus she walked straight ahead until she came to the watchful guard over the Sacred Room. You all know him, but I will not mention his name. He has confessed it all to me, but on pain of death I would not betray him.

"She walked, as I have explained, like one who sleeps and yet walks, and the guard at the door, seeing her approach, believed that she was asleep.

"As she came near to him, he touched her gently on the arm, and then caught her as she pretended to start awake and to faint from terror. Sleep-walking persons do that, you may know.

"The guard reasoned with her, talked with her, reminded her that she was in her night-robe, and finally persuaded her to return to her apartment; but as she was going away she stopped again, and laughed toward him, with her wonderful beauty shining out.

"'I was eating candy,' she said to him, 'and I fell asleep; see!' and she extended one of her hands which contained several squares of sweets. She plumped one

of the squares into her mouth, and the others she dropped into the hand of the guard.

"'Eat them,' she said to him. 'I hope they will not make you sleepy, too.' And he ate the sweets, one after another, until they were disposed of.

"Dawn was creeping into the palace when he awoke, for they did make him sleep. He glanced around him affrightedly, realizing that he had slept at his post; but the door of the Sacred Room was closed and locked as it had been, and he was assured in his own mind that no one had been there.

"Without the three keys, he knew that none could enter that room; without the six keys, he knew that none could enter the room and also open the onyx box. He was reassured.

"The sweets he had eaten left no ill effects to tell him that he had been drugged; he had no reason to believe he had been so treated.

"From that day he sometimes thought of the night he had slept at his post, but gradually it passed from his mind, until the moment of terrible revelation, when it was discovered that the great ruby had been stolen.

"Then he remembered the incident of the sweets anew. Then it came back to him that the ruby must have been taken away that night, but he was so filled with terror that he no longer had the courage to confess.

"Five months had passed, and if he confessed then it would have been asked of him, 'Why did you not relate this story at the time it happened?' How could he have answered?

"He was so filled with terror that he kept his secret—kept it, by a strange coincidence, until the evening of the day before yesterday, when a telegram came to the Princess Deehra from that same beautiful white woman from the West, saying that she was on her way to the palace, and would soon be there.

"But he confessed his wrong to me then, and I knew that evening, eighteen hours before she arrived and made her confession, who it was who had stolen the ruby.

"It was then that I sent out word to the faithful to prepare the funeral pyre, and it was then that four of us met at midnight and decided that, unless the raja decided upon visiting stern punishment upon the white woman from the West, we would take her away and purify her by our ever-living fire.

"It was to the wife of Sindahr that I communicated our wishes; to her I outlined the plan of capture, and to her I gave the task of taking the white woman from her bed and carrying her away to the mountains, for it would have been a sacrilege to have had only men to do the deed, since she was to be given for sacrifice.

"Last night the wife of Sindahr came, and with her came Sindahr himself, who entered the palace and went to my own room, where he waited until the time came when we could creep down together and hear the confession of the white woman as she made it to the raja.

"But we had believed beforehand that he would forgive her, and we were prepared.

"There were horses in waiting out at the twin rocks; there was a ladder of rope ready to be hooked upon the ledge of the window as soon as she should sleep; there was a drug ready with which to render her sleep sound and lasting.

"But she slept lightly. She awakened before the wife of Sindahr could administer the drug, and she struck out wildly with her hands, drawing blood.

"Then it was that the others were obliged to lay hands on her, to stifle her cries, and to force her into forgetfulness through the drug; but they carried her out through the window and across to the twin rocks, and placed her on the back of a horse, and brought her to the mountains; and now some of you know by what path she has been taken to get her to the Temple of Gemini, where the funeral pyre will be erected.

"There is with her a strong guard. She will be kept unconscious until two hours before the time for the sacrifice, when she will be restored to consciousness and told what is in store for her.

"And then the women of the priesthood will disrobe her. She will be bathed, and the linen, soaked in the water of alum, will be wrapped around her; she will be bound with the plaited ropes and carried with due ceremony to the pyre, and there, as the flames leap up and devour her beauty, which has been put to such devilish uses, and sear her heart, which has been so false, and purify her soul, that has been so vile, we will have reason to be thankful that she has been delivered into our hand for the sacrifice."

Among any other set of men in the world, there would have been cheering or applause of some kind at the conclusion of such a speech; but here there were only guttural murmurs of approval; and they were barely uttered when Jahra continued:

"I have this much more to say to you, my brothers: The sacrifice is fixed for the day following to-morrow, at sunrise. It will take place at the Temple of Gemini, and you all know how to reach that sacred place.

"And this much more: There is now in this village a man who is pursuing the white woman from the West, to rescue her from the hands of those who would offer her for sacrifice. He is a determined man, and he has with him other men who are equally determined.

"They will use all their efforts to effect a rescue, and it will be my especial duty to see that they do not succeed. They have assured me that, if I play them false, I shall suffer the same fate that is reserved for the white woman from the West; but I shall take that risk, and I shall lose them in the mountains, so that it will be weeks before they will get out again.

"I will be with you when the sacred time for the sac-

rifice arrives. If I am not, you will know that I have also suffered for my zeal for you, and my earnest endeavor to propitiate the deity that sent the heart of the goddess to us, more than a thousand years ago."

As he ceased speaking and drew back a few steps, the men who were gathered there to hear him came forward one by one and saluted, as if he were either some sacred personage, or else one in authority over them; and then, one by one, they melted away in the darkness, going toward the narrow ledge which would take them around the edge of the white rock.

But Nick Carter was already out of their way, so that they would not discover him. He had accomplished this by crawling upon his stomach along the base of the white rock until he found a depression that was deep enough to contain his body while he was lying at full length; and while he listened to the speech made by Jahra, he had kept pulling the rocky shale over his body, until now, at the close of the speech, it was quite covered. He knew that none of them could see him, and that there was no danger of his being discovered, unless one of the men should step on him.

But nothing of the kind happened.

One by one the men glided past Nick, in single file, made their way around the base of the rock, and disappeared, until finally Jahra stood alone in the fire-lighted place; stood there with folded arms and solemn mien, gazing into the fire with a rapt expression upon his handsome face.

And so he remained for nearly an hour, while Nick, who had risen from his place of concealment, stood silently only a few feet behind him, waiting.

At last Jahra turned about, and, as he did so, discovered for the first time that he was not alone; for Nick Carter, in the native costume he had assumed, stood there with folded arms, facing him in the firelight.

CHAPTER VII.

NICK CARTER'S STRUGGLE FOR HIS LIFE.

It was a moment fraught with unthinkable possibilities.

Neither man uttered a sound, and the detective saw that it was only surprise that had found expression upon Jahra's face.

It came to Nick in that instant that Jahra did not recognize him; that he saw in the man who confronted him only one of his own kind, who had lingered after the others had gone for some purpose that was not made manifest.

But the detective also knew that he could not carry out the deception.

The instant he spoke he would be betrayed, for Jahra was a man wiser than his fellows, and was not easily to be fooled; but he waited for Jahra to break the silence, which he did after a moment.

"Why does my brother linger?" he asked, in the soft tongue of his native country.

Nick knew that the time for deception was past already, and he answered, in English, at the same time throwing aside the robe he wore and standing revealed, save for the turban and the stain on his face, for what he was.

"I followed you, Jahra," he said, "and I heard all. Did you think that you could deceive me so easily?"

The Hindu started back a pace, and then stood looking, with dilated eyes, at the detective.

He did not reply; but the fingers of his right hand twitched nervously, and then began to move cautiously under his robe, as if in search of something.

Nick realized that he was seeking a weapon of defense or offense, and he quietly drew a revolver and pointed it at the man's breast.

"Put your hands out where I can see them, Jahra," he commanded in a calm voice; and the man, realizing that he was helpless before this American, obeyed.

"Now, Jahra," continued the detective, "it is evident to me that you came with us to the mountains only to deceive us."

"Yes, sahib," he replied stoically, "it is true."

"And you intended to-morrow to lead us into the mountains and lose us, so that there would be no hope of our return to the palace for many days?"

"Yes."

"While, in the meantime, the sacrifice, as you call it, would have been performed, and the lady who has been so unfortunate as to offend you would have been burned alive. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Do you and your people find no room in your heart for forgiveness of her, notwithstanding the fact that she has returned the ruby?"

"She has none the less defiled it. The deity will not be propitiated until she is sacrificed."

"Well, you can put it down in your diary right now that she won't be sacrificed, but that a good many of your people will be, unless she is returned forthwith to those who would protect her."

The man did not reply.

"Do you place any value whatever upon your own life, Jahra?" asked the detective.

The Hindu shrugged his shoulders, and raised his head a trifle haughtily.

"Our lives are given to us for a purpose," he replied. "If I have to relinquish my own a little sooner than I could wish, it is fate."

"You know, don't you, that I could kill you now by a mere pressure of my finger against the trigger?"

"Yes."

"Then, if I tell you that I *will* kill you unless you return with me at once to the house where we are staying, and guide us at once through the mountains to the Temple of Gemini, what will be your answer?"

"I will laugh at you."

"You will refuse?"

"Yes."

"Even though the refusal should cost you your life?"

"Yes."

Nick saw that he could not frighten the man, so he thought to appeal to his cupidity; and he said, after a pause:

"Would money influence you, Jahra?"

"No."

"Gold?"

"No."

"Gold in quantities so great that you could live the balance of your life in luxury?"

"No."

While they were talking, the detective had stepped back a couple of paces, and had lowered the muzzle of his weapon. The fire, in the meanwhile, had been dying out, so that now it was only a mass of embers; but there were so many of them that they still afforded considerable light upon the scene.

They were standing, the reader will remember, somewhat to the front of the center of a triangular space, or, to speak more correctly, a quadrant. If you should cut a quarter section from a disk, and then place your finger a third of the way back from the center of the circular edge of it, you would locate just about the position they occupied.

The two sides of the triangle behind them were formed of perpendicular rock; the circular edge in front of them overlooked an abyss where it was hundreds of feet to the bottom; and all of it was enveloped in black, impenetrable darkness. It seemed, indeed, like a bottomless gulf.

Possibly the detective did not realize what a wary and formidable foe he had confronted. It is certain that, for a moment, he forgot his watchfulness, and that Jahra was quick to see it, and to take advantage of it, for now, with a motion as quick as the spring of a tiger, he darted forward toward the detective, and, as he did so, as if by magic, a long, slender cord that had been wound around his body fell from it.

It was the cord of the professional strangler.

Nick realized that the instant the motion was made, for it was not the first time he had encountered Jahra's kind.

He knew that, once it encircled his neck, he was as good as lost, and so expert are its users in handling it that, as the man darted forward, there was only one way in which Nick could escape.

That was by letting his legs collapse under him and sinking instantly to the ground, for had he thrown up his arms to defend himself, one of them must have become pinioned, also, and he would have become, indeed, a helpless victim of the strangler.

You will say that he might have used his pistol; but even that was denied him, for there was absolutely no time to do anything save what he did do, which was to collapse upon the ground before his enemy.

The cord, which had been aimed at his neck, struck only the turban he wore on his head, and dislodged it.

The attack of a strangler's cord is very much like the attack of a serpent; it must be recovered and well in hand again before it can be used a second time, just as a snake has to coil for a second spring.

But Nick, in falling to the ground, had lost, for the moment, whatever advantage he had possessed before, and Jahra, quick to see it, dropped his cord and leaped forward full upon the fallen detective, bearing him down again as he sought to rise, and clutching him by the throat with all the fierce energy of a truly desperate man.

It was evident that Jahra had never heard about the great strength of Nick Carter, or else he had full confidence in his own; and he was a strong and an agile man, too, as Nick soon discovered.

Moreover, he had the advantage, since he was on top, and because he had had the opportunity to seize the detective by the throat with his long and tapering fingers, which were wonderfully wiry and strong.

Before Nick realized it, he was gasping for breath,

for Jahra's fingers were compressing his throat terribly.

But then he got his own hands into action.

He reached up and grasped the wrist of the hand that held his throat, and tore it away by sheer violence; and then he hugged his enemy down closely against him, shutting down upon him like a vise, and endeavoring in that way to force the breath from the Hindu's body.

He could feel that Jahra was fumbling with his disengaged hand, to find his knife, and he knew that, if once it was found and grasped, a second would not elapse before it would be driven into his body; and so he exerted himself for one great effort to throw the man from him and get upon his feet.

How he accomplished it he could not have told; but he did succeed in doing it, and so forcibly that the Hindu was hurled several feet away, and landed upon his back among the embers at the outer edge of the fire.

It was a guttural exclamation of rage and pain that Jahra uttered as he bounded to his feet, for the hot coals had scorched him; and instantly he launched himself forward again, seizing upon the detective before the latter had time to avoid him, or even to strike him with his fist.

He had managed, too, to draw his dagger as he made the spring, and only for the fact that Nick's right hand reached up and grasped his wrist, it must have been instantly sheated in the detective's body.

So, for a moment that seemed much longer to each of them, they struggled together; and, to Nick Carter's surprise, he discovered that Jahra was almost as strong and agile as he was himself.

Twice, as he held him there, the detective tried to throw him from his feet; but each time the Hindu alighted like a cat, and refused to be downed.

They were both practically wrestling with one arm, and with their left ones, at that, since the fingers of Nick's right hand were clasped around the wrist of the Hindu's right, and these two arms were held high in the air over their heads.

As they struggled forward and backward, the pressure that Nick put upon Jahra's wrist had its effect, and presently the dagger dropped to the floor of the ledge.

Then, with a motion that was as quick as a flash of light, the detective threw his man from him again, releasing him as he did so, and at the same instant striking out with his fist with all the force he could command.

The blow landed squarely against the Hindu's chin, and it sent him reeling backward directly into the very center of the mass of glowing embers of the fire, so that, with only the thin sandals he wore on his feet to protect them, it was like stepping upon the surface of a red-hot stove.

It seemed for an instant as if he were going to fall bodily at full length upon the embers, but, instead, he uttered a yell of pain and leaped into the air backward.

His only idea was to get out of the fire, and he forgot how near it was to the edge of the abyss.

That wild leap that he took to escape the fire carried him to the very edge of the rocks, and for just one instant he stood there, tottering, trying to regain his balance.

But he had gone just the fraction of an inch too far, for in another instant, uttering a frightful cry, he plunged backward over the precipice into the black void beneath him; and Nick Carter stood alone upon the triangular platform of rock.

CHAPTER VIII.

ONE AGAINST THREE.

That wild cry uttered by Jahra as he fell into the abyss reached other ears than Nick Carter's, for, even as the detective ran forward a step, to peer after the fallen man, he heard an answering shout from the path by which he had come there, and he realized instantly that some of the men who had been there to attend the meeting were returning, to see what had become of Jahra.

Instantly he leaped forward and seized the discarded robe and turban that had been knocked from his head, and he adjusted them with all speed; then he picked up the strangler's cord and the dagger that Jahra had dropped, and squatted beside the embers to wait.

For he knew that he could not get past these men—not even past one of them—along the narrow ledge which led around the base of the white rock.

"If there are only one or two, or even three," he thought to himself, "I can perhaps overcome them; but should there be more, this is too precarious a place in which to fight against such odds, and I must use strategy."

He had barely seated himself and begun to rock his body forward and backward, when three men stepped

silently into the firelight, and stood there with folded arms, regarding him; and then it was that one of the greatest surprises of Nick Carter's life came to him.

"It is Sindahr!" he heard one of them exclaim to the other, in Hindustani.

Once before that night, although in utter darkness, he had been mistaken for the man who was called Sindahr. That time it had been his voice which had given rise to the mistake; but now he had not spoken a word, and therefore it followed that, in the faint light of the embers, he somehow looked like Sindahr.

It was an accident, of course, for he had never seen the man for whom he was mistaken; the man of whom he now knew, since Jahra's speech, to have been the one who aided in the abduction of Rena from the palace.

He recalled instantly the fact that his voice had already deceived one man into the belief that he was Sindahr, and that, therefore, it might be expected to serve the same purpose again. He resolved to risk it when the moment should come for him to speak.

There was silence for several moments; evidently they were waiting for him to say something to them, but he did not accept the invitation. He also remained silent.

At last one of them—the eldest and tallest man of the three—addressed him, but with such an evidence of profound respect that Nick at once concluded that Sindahr must be a man of considerable authority among them.

"Sindhar," said the man, "we have come in search of Jahra. Where is he?"

Nick waved his hand through the air, and then, after a minute, replied:

"Jahra has gone about his business."

"We waited at the end of the ledge, where it begins to widen; but he did not pass us, oh, Sindahr," insisted the other.

"He has gone about his business," Nick repeated, again waving his hand.

The three men looked at one another in perplexity. It was evident to Nick that they had waited somewhere for Jahra where they knew he could not have passed them without being seen, and that they could not understand his not being there upon the ledge.

Presently the tall man spoke again.

"We heard a cry as we were approaching," he said. "What was it?"

"If you heard a cry, then it was a cry you heard," was the stolid reply.

"Who uttered it, Sindahr?"

"It was the cry of a lost soul on its way to perdition; it was the cry of a wandering spirit about to leave its earthy habitation and to go forth into the great world beyond, to beg forgiveness for past misdeeds. It was the cry of Jahra that you heard."

"Of Jahra! Where, then, is he?"

"He has gone about his business, as I have said."

"But how did he go? He could not have passed us without our seeing him."

"He went—*yonder!*" and Nick pointed with his index-finger straight toward the black abyss over the edge of the rock.

"*There!*" The three of them started back in terror, and for a moment it seemed that, notwithstanding their swarthy skins, they turned pale with fright. "Where is he?" one of them asked again, after a moment.

"He is there, I tell you," repeated Nick, and again he pointed toward the abyss.

"Do you mean that Jahra, our Jahra, is dead?" was the next question; and the detective nodded his head in token of assent.

"How? By whose hand? By yours, Sindahr?"

"My friends, Jahra leaped backward from the face of the cliff into the abyss. I did not slay him. I did not throw him over into the gulf; he leaped there himself. Perhaps he has wings with which he can fly; perhaps he is even now walking toward the town, as well as you are. Who knows? I only know that when he left me he went by that route, and that he sprang to the edge of the rock himself, and then went into the abyss, uttering the cry you heard as he did so."

Again the three looked into one another's faces. Then the tall man said:

"We do not understand, Sindahr. It is inexplicable. Tell us, if you please, how you came here without our knowledge? You were not at the meeting that was held here."

"Perhaps," replied Nick slowly, "I came over the edge of the cliffs; perhaps I flew down the side of the mountains of rocks; perhaps a spirit of the night brought me here; all those things I have named are possible. But rest your minds, my brethren. None of them happened. I came by the pathway along the ledge, even as you came upon me but now."

"But we did not see you."

"No."

"How is it possible that you should come here by that route and we not see you?"

"If I were invisible, you could not see me, could you?"

"No."

"Then answer the questions for yourselves."

"Have you the power of making yourself invisible, Sindahr?"

"My presence here is your answer, is it not?"

"It is strange—very strange."

"Aye; but stranger things are to happen."

"Will you tell us why you came?"

"Yes. I came to punish Jahra."

"To punish Jahra! Why, oh, Sindahr?"

"I need not answer that, since he is punished."

The men were silent for a moment, studying him intently. Then they drew aside, and got together in a knot, whispering among themselves earnestly.

If it had not been that they stood between him and the way out of that place, Nick would have taken the opportunity to escape, trusting to the darkness and to his own agility to avoid them in his flight.

But they were in the way.

He could not reach the pathway along the ledge without going directly past them, and he knew that they would stop him if he attempted to do that.

But he also realized that their suspicions were aroused, and that he must be ready to act quickly.

It was the tall man who took a step toward him presently, and, as he did so, the detective rose to his feet and moved backward, so that he would have the advantage of space between them. He placed his hand upon the butt of his pistol, but he did not want to use it unless it should become absolutely necessary.

He knew that the noise of the report would echo and reecho along those stone walls like the reverberation of a cannon, and that the whole town would be aroused by it, doubtless.

"Sindahr," said the man, "will you accompany us to the house of Gwanpore?"

Now, Nick had no idea where the house of Gwanpore was, or what it was, and he had no fancy for putting himself in the power of these three men, even for a moment; so he replied:

"No."

"Then we say that you are not Sindahr, although you have his voice and his features. Or if you are the body of Sindahr, then the spirit of another has entered your earthly habitation, and you are not he. Only at the house of Gwanpore can you establish yourself. By your own confession, you are responsible for the death of Jahra, who has gone over the cliff. By our laws you are responsible for it. What have you to say?"

"This!" exclaimed Nick; and his hands reached out, each containing a revolver which he pointed at the men, managing to cover them all with the two muzzles. "If one of you makes a move that I do not like, that instant he dies. Hold your hands above your heads!"

But they had no idea of doing such a thing as that. They were not accustomed to the command, and did not understand its significance; and so, on the instant that Nick uttered it, all three of them threw themselves forward at once, full at the detective, who stood alone before them.

He had time only to pull the trigger once, and then they were upon him.

But there were only two now, for the other, with a wild cry, leaped into the air and ran, as if the impact of the bullet had crazed him, straight for the edge of the abyss, and in a moment, even as his two companions seized upon the detective, leaped far out into the darkness and disappeared.

Instantly the arms of the two men were around the detective, dragging him down, and at the same time pulling him toward the edge of the rock.

He saw instantly what they intended to do; they meant to throw him after Jahra.

By a mighty effort, he managed at last to get his grip upon the throat of one of them, and shut down the muscles of his hand with all the strength he could muster, until he could feel that the man he was choking was growing weaker and more limp in his grasp.

With the other arm alone he found the third man, knowing even as he did so that he was being dragged slowly but certainly toward the edge of the rock, and that, if it continued, the time could not be long ere he would be hurled to certain death.

They were within four or five feet of the edge of the rock, when the man he was choking collapsed; and Nick instantly released his hold upon him, and, using that freed hand as a weapon, clenched his fist and struck the only opponent who remained to him now full in the face.

He staggered back and partly lost his hold, and Nick struck him yet again; and then he loosed the other hand and hit him a last blow with that one.

It was sufficient.

The man staggered backward and fell, almost at the edge of the rock; but he did not pitch over it. He lay there, with his feet sticking out over the abyss, but with his body safely upon it.

For a moment Nick stood quite still, regarding both fallen men, who were lying quite near together, the other being not so close to the edge as this one.

Then, realizing that this last man would fall into the gulf unless he was rescued, the detective took a quick step forward, intending to drag him back again to safety.

But the Hindu, who was not unconscious, it seemed, saw his act and mistook his motive.

He tried to leap to his feet, and, in the effort, staggered, then slipped.

In an instant he lost his footing, and his legs slipped over the edge of the rock.

As that happened he reached out wildly, to seize upon something to save himself, and he grasped the legs of his only remaining companion.

In just one second more Nick Carter stood there alone, dazed and uncertain how it had happened, for both men had slipped over the edge of the gulf and disappeared.

CHAPTER IX.

CONDEMNED TO DEATH BY FIRE.

So much had happened in so short a space of time that Nick was appalled when he thought of it.

Four men had been precipitated in the almost bottomless abyss over the edge of the rock since he had come there to overhear the particulars of the meeting of the fanatics; he had struggled with each of the four men, and yet had not wilfully driven one of them to that wild leap into eternity.

The first of these—Jahra—had been knocked backward into the midst of the fire, so that the live coals had burned his feet; and in his pain he had jumped too far in escaping, and so had toppled over into the depths below.

The second—one of three who attacked the detective simultaneously—he had shot, to be sure; but he knew perfectly well where the bullet had struck the man, for he had aimed at his forearm, and he always hit the mark he aimed at. And so the bullet had merely smashed through the bones of the arm, and there was no reason why the victim of that wound should have turned like a madman and thrown himself to death the way he had done; unless, indeed, as is sometimes the case, the impact of the bullet had crazed him for the moment. But the man had been twenty feet away from the edge when the bullet hit him.

The third had been in no danger at all. He had only been choked into insensibility, and would presently have recovered, and have been as well as ever. He had been dragged to his death by the fourth man, and that at the very instant when Nick was hastening forward to save them both.

No; the detective did not consider that he could hold himself responsible for the deaths of these men, although they had tried their best to murder him; although all four of them richly deserved the fate that had overtaken them.

For a few moments more he remained quite still, looking off into the darkness; then he turned and made his way rapidly past the glowing embers of the fire, toward the pathway along the ledge that would take him back again to the town, and to where he had left his good friends awaiting him.

But Nick Carter's adventures for the night were not yet over.

That echoing pistol-shot had been heard, and, following upon it, the cries of the men now at the bottom of the gulf.

Even as Nick advanced along the ledge, he saw lights approaching him, and he knew that they were carried by men who had been attracted by the sounds in the night.

He knew, too, that his only chance now of escape existed in his ability to reach a place of comparative safety beyond the ledge before those men could reach it to head him off.

Once they were there, and with him still on the narrow way, he would be in a cul-de-sac from which there could be no possibility of escape. He would be like a rat in a trap, and the Hindus could despatch him at their leisure, or save him to keep Rena company on the funeral pyre in the mountains.

So he broke into a run the instant he knew that they were coming; and he ran with all speed along the ledge, at the imminent risk of pitching into the space below him, hoping that he could arrive at a broader pathway before they reached the narrow one.

But it is likely that they had foreseen something of this kind, and had thrown out scouts ahead of their lights for that reason.

At all events, Nick had only covered a little more than half the distance, and had reached a point where the pathway had broadened to a width of ten or twelve feet, when, without warning, two men leaped out from behind some shelter, or from a shadow darker than the others, and while one of them threw himself headlong upon the ground, to trip the escaping man, the other alighted, with the agility of a cat, upon his shoulders.

Nick, tripped by the first man and weighted down by the second, pitched forward and fell upon his face; and even as he did so, others ran out from other places of concealment, and he was pinioned down so tightly and by so many that he could not move or do anything to defend himself.

It was all over in a moment.

The detective found himself tightly bound; and then in silence he was placed upon a litter that was hastily improvised, and carried away down the steep streets to the lowest level of the town; to that same level as the house was on where he had left his friends, and where he had first encountered the man who mistook him for Sindahr.

But they turned in the direction opposite that from which Nick had come originally, and passed along in silence until at last they entered a house larger than the others; a house wherein there was a great, hall-like room, and which the detective instantly guessed was the house of Gwanpore—though what in the world that expression meant he had not the least idea.

He was dumped unceremoniously upon the floor, in the center of the big room, while the men who had captured him, and who had assisted in his downfall, drew back and appeared to wait for the arrival of others.

They came presently—a score of them; and they were led by a personage—we use the expression advisedly—in whom Nick instantly recognized the man Sindahr.

Not that he had ever seen Sindahr, for he had not; but he had already had experience enough to know that there must be some sort of resemblance between that man and himself.

He could see it now, notwithstanding the swarthy skin of the Hindu; and when the man spoke, Nick was startled anew, the voice was so like his own.

The conversation that followed was in Hindustani, of course, but since Nick spoke it perfectly, it was all understood by him.

"We found him," announced one of the men who had assisted in the capture, whom Nick believed was the same fellow with whom he had first conversed, and who called him Sindahr. "Here, oh, Sindahr, is the person who has dared to wear your name and use your sacred office to his own benefit. It is for you to say, Sindahr, what shall be done with him."

Sindahr stepped forward, and for a space of several moments stood quite still, looking down upon the captive. Then he made a motion which was quickly obeyed, and the bonds which held Nick so tightly were cut, and he was helped to his feet.

He glanced quickly around him, wondering if there was a possibility of escape; but he discovered that the room had gradually filled, until there were nearly a hundred men there, and he could not have forced his way through them had he been ten times stronger and greater than he was.

The smile, faint but perceptible, which showed for a moment on the face of Sindahr, would have told him, if nothing else had done so, that it was impossible for him to escape, at least at that time, so he put a bold face on the situation, and, looking his captor in the eye, smiled back at him.

"You are an Englishman?" said Sindahr, in English, and as perfectly as Nick could have spoken them.

"No; I am an American."

"You are in disguise, then?"

"Yes."

"To represent me?"

"No; I did not know of your existence at the time I put on this disguise. I had never heard of you. It is only a coincidence that I should resemble you, and that our voices should be alike."

"Why are you here, and why are you disguised?"

"I came here to rescue from the hands of those who have captured her an American woman who has been condemned to suffer death by fire at the hands of men who think they are propitiating some deity."

"You came here believing that you could rescue from our hands the woman we describe as the white woman from the West?"

"Yes."

"She who stole the ruby and afterward returned it?"

"Yes."

"She has been condemned in council, and she must suffer the penalty for what she has done against our unwritten laws."

"She has been condemned, and you are intent upon carrying out the spirit and the letter of that condemnation, Sindahr; but you seem to be an intelligent man, and don't you know that you and your people will reap a terrible harvest if you go ahead with this business? England may wink at such things, at times; but my country will not. Every man of you will be hung up by the necks until they are dead. If you don't know it, you should."

Sindahr shrugged his shoulders. Then he said:

"For the hanging process that you refer to, the laws of the white men require proofs; and in this case, as in others, there will be no way to get that proof. Did you murder Jahra?"

"No. He committed suicide."

"That is a lie. You killed him."

"I did not. He—I struck him in self-defense, and he staggered into the fire. In getting out of it, he jumped too far, and is now at the bottom of the cliff."

"There were three others who went back to bring Sindahr here, to this house. Where are they?"

"They are also at the bottom of the cliff."

"Where you threw them."

"No; where they went of their own accord. One of them took a thirty-foot run to make the leap, and he did it just as though he enjoyed it, too; another I choked into insensibility, and, after that, his third friend dragged him off into eternity. I tried to prevent it, but I couldn't."

"You did well to bring the young prince into the mountains with you," said Sindahr, apparently paying not the slightest heed to what Nick had said, "for otherwise all the white men who are in your party would be captured and brought here to this house now, and they would be held in reserve for the same fate that must soon be yours. But the presence of the young prince, whom we both respect and love, saves them. To-morrow they will perhaps linger around here, searching for you: if so, so much the better: it will delay them the more. As for you—will that stain that is on your face and hands wash off?"

"Oh, yes; easily, Sindahr."

He made a sign to some of the men, and soap and water and towels were placed before the detective.

"Wash," ordered Sindahr; "and, when you have done that, divest yourself of the costume of my people. Appear as you are. After that I will tell you what your fate will be."

Nick was not sorry for an opportunity for getting rid of the stain, and also of the costume, which greatly impeded his movements; and he was permitted to go into a far corner of the room while he did so.

Beside the stand upon which the basin rested was a large bag filled to the brim with rice, and while he was drying his hands he managed, unseen, to fill several of his pockets with it, for it occurred to him at that moment that he might find an important use for it later. We will discover presently that he was right about that.

With the stains washed away and his face and hands dried, he was called back again to confront Sindahr, who regarded him for a moment in silence, and then said slowly:

"Your name, I have been told, is Carter."

"Yes."

"I will tell you your fate, Mr. Carter. You will be taken from here within the hour, and conveyed to the mountains, and to the Temple of Gemini; there, twenty-four hours after another dawn, you will be placed upon a funeral pyre, close beside the one allotted to the white woman from the West, and you will keep her company on her journey to the realm unknown."

CHAPTER X.

THE SIGNAL OF SEVEN SHOTS.

"That is a pleasant prospect," thought Nick, as he looked around him at the stoical faces of the men who had heard his sentence. "If I thought that scoundrel could succeed in carrying it out, I would feel myself in a desperate position; but I don't think so."

Suddenly he bethought himself of his revolvers, which had not been taken from him. They were still in his pockets, and his hands were free.

He looked around him again toward the door, but now the room was thronged with men, and he realized that, if he had had a dozen revolvers and a fair opportunity to use many of them, he could not hope to reach that doorway before he would be dragged down again.

And even if he reached the doorway, he could not hope to escape beyond it.

The pass out of the mountain was narrow and difficult to follow; he would surely be recaptured before he could go very far.

But there was one thing he thought he could do; he could put up a good big bluff for the benefit of this motley horde of ruffians.

Suddenly he took a quick leap backward, and, drawing the two revolvers, placed his back against the wall; and standing thus, he held both pistols pointed straight at Sindahr's heart.

To his infinite astonishment, not a man in that room moved to arrest his apparently contemplated act; and Sindahr himself only smiled.

"If I have to suffer death in the manner you have named," said Nick, "it is just as well that I should kill you first, is it not?" he asked, looking straight into Sindahr's eyes, which never once quavered or flinched.

For reply, Sindahr put his hands behind him, and looked calmly at Nick.

"Shoot," he said. "If it is your wish to kill me so, there is not one here who will raise a hand to prevent it."

The detective regarded him steadily. He wondered if this were also a bluff of some sort; but the longer he looked at the man, the less he was inclined to think so. The man was still smiling, and he seemed not in the least frightened, and, for a moment, Nick wondered if in some manner these natives had managed to take the cartridges from his pistols.

But he knew better than that.

There had been no time when they could do so without his seeing it, and he had observed nothing of the kind.

"I've a good mind to take you at your word, and shoot you," he said; and again that smile came to Sindahr's eyes and lips. He replied:

"Shoot, if you will. There are none here to prevent you; but Sindahr's time has not come yet. It is not so written in the book of fate."

"I reckon you're right about that, Sindahr. I couldn't shoot a skunk down in that manner. I haven't got it in me, and I guess you know it."

"I knew that you would not shoot me even when you threatened it," was the calm reply.

"Well, don't you be too mighty certain about that, Sindahr. Hold up your hands, over your head; both of them."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because I tell you to do so. If you do not, I may put the bullet through your body."

"I will not hold up my hands as you say. Why should I?"

"Then I will pierce your ears for you. Look out, now!"

The pistol cracked spitefully, and instantly Sindahr clapped one hand to one of his ears, from which the blood was flowing, for the bullet had taken off the lobe of the ear as neatly as a knife could have done it.

A murmur of dismay went the rounds of the room, but it had not died out ere the pistol cracked again, and the other ear was mutilated in the same manner; and still Nick stood at bay, with his back against the wall, and with the pistols in his hands, knowing that he still had ten shots left to him, for they were both six-shooters.

"Will you hold up your hands now, Sindahr, or shall I take off the tops of your ears, as well?" he demanded. As he spoke he saw that two of the men in the room were trying to edge their way nearer to him, and he turned just a little toward them.

"Get back where you belong," he said. "If any of you try to come nearer to me than you are now, it will be a death-warrant. I can't shoot a man dead who stands up before me as Sindahr does, but I can and will shoot a man who tries to sneak up on me now. Sindahr, shall I remove the tops of your ears, or will you hold up your hands as I asked you to do?"

There was no reply, and one of Nick's revolvers cracked a third time; and this time the top of Sindahr's right ear disappeared as if by magic, and the blood ran down his face in little streams; and then, as the man involuntarily threw up both his hands and staggered back somewhat, there came two reports in quick succession, and Sindahr stood looking dumbly and dazed at his hands, from which both thumbs were missing.

"There," said Nick. "I think, Sindahr, that you are marked now so that you will be known when you are seen. I couldn't shoot you down in cold blood, when you stood up before me in the way you did; and you knew I would not. But I could mark you without hurting you much, and I could make it a bit difficult for you to hold a knife, or a strangler's cord, in your hands hereafter—as you see. I fancy your friends will not think you are quite as great hereafter. I have heard that a strangler is no good if he loses his thumbs."

The man did not reply.

He was still gazing dumbly at his hands, for, without knowing it, Nick had visited upon him the very worst punishment he could have inflicted.

This particular set of fanatics were all stranglers, and without their thumbs it was, as Nick said, useless to be one. Sindahr would much rather have lost his life than his two thumbs.

The murmur from the men in the room was growing louder with each moment, and it is likely that they would presently have rushed forward and done Nick to death, had not Sindahr at that moment recovered himself.

"Save him for the fire!" he called out in Hindustani, perceiving what they were about to do. "He cannot escape us. Save him for the slow fire, not the blazing one. He shall know what it is to suffer."

Nick still had seven shots left in his pistols, and that was the exact number he wanted for a signal to Patsy, if only Patsy could hear it.

Near him, in fact less than five feet distant, was one of the windows of the house, and fortunately it was a glass window.

With a jump, Nick reached it, and with one smash with the butt of one of the pistols, he knocked away part of the glass. Then he thrust that weapon outside, and fired it three times in quick succession. He waited an instant and fired once; then another instant, and fired the remaining three shots; and it was all done so quickly that the signal was given before a man in that room could do anything to prevent it.

"There, Sindahr," he said, turning back into the room. "You can maul me all you please now. I haven't got a shot left in my locker. I don't want to kill any of you, and so, instead, I have just sent a signal to my friends, telling them that I am a prisoner here in your hands, and that they can come and rescue me as soon as they please."

That was rather a foolish statement to make for Nick, because Sindahr realized that it was more than likely true. Although his friends were even then engaged in binding his mutilated ears and hands, he gave a few quick, sharp orders, with the result that a horde of the men rushed forward, Nick was seized, hurried out of doors and along the street through the darkness at a rapid pace, and with so many men around him and crowding him that, although he was not bound, it was utterly useless to resist.

Then Nick heard the clatter of horses' hoofs on the rocky roadway, and presently he was told in a rough voice to mount, and at the same time he felt the point of a dagger picking him.

"Anyhow," he thought, "this horse will take me to the Temple of Gemini, and I couldn't discover it otherwise without a guide; so here goes."

With a bound he leaped into the saddle, and instantly his feet were drawn together under the horse's belly and tied there.

But his hands were left free, and before he mounted the horse he managed to drop one of his empty pistols on the ground in the darkness without being seen; now, as soon as he was seated in the saddle, he pulled a handful of rice from one of his pockets, and dropped a splash of it beside him.

It was not ten minutes after the time he told Sindahr that his shots were a signal before they were in the saddle and galloping swiftly through the darkness, along the road which wound through the pass in the mountains, gradually ascending them.

But the detective kept his wits thoroughly about him.

He knew that if Patsy had heard that signal, he would understand it and heed it without delay.

The seven shots, fired as Nick had done it, being translated, meant: "I am in serious trouble. Follow if you can."

It was an old signal that had been used between Nick and Chick many years ago, in Nevada; but Patsy understood it quite as well as Chick, and if he could hear the seven shots, he would know instantly that they came from Nick, and would understand what they meant.

Nick had dropped his pistol in the roadway, hoping that Patsy would find it, and knowing that he would recognize it if he did; and Patsy would know, also, that, if it were possible for Nick to find a way to mark the route by which he had been compelled to travel, he would do so.

Therefore, when Patsy discovered the first splash of rice, he might pay little or no attention to it; but when he should discover another and another, and yet others, he would know that Nick had found a way to fill his pockets with the grain, and that it would show him the trail as long as the supply held out.

There was only one thing that Nick feared in the matter, and that was that the men who were left behind them at the town might prevent his friends from following; but Patsy and those with him were not of the sort to be easily prevented from doing things they had made up their minds to do; and the natives would not dare

to show much violence to that particular party, because of the presence of the young prince.

Altogether, Nick thought that the prospects looked reasonably bright, notwithstanding the fact that he was being carried away into captivity, and was already condemned to death by fire.

Somehow, he couldn't see the fire, or smell it, so assured did he feel that he would not only escape, but that he would succeed in rescuing Rena Payson.

It turned out that it was only about an hour before dawn when they started, for they had not traveled far before the first streaks of daylight began to show gray over the tops of the mountains, and presently it was day.

Nick used but very little of his rice along that mountain pass, for there was no way of getting out of it, as yet, and Patsy would know that they had gone straight ahead; but he did drop an occasional splash of it for the assistant to find.

Two hours after sunrise, they turned into a narrow defile, where they were obliged to ride in single file, and here, as they turned, Nick distributed his rice with more freedom. He had managed to tear a small hole in one of his pockets, and he permitted it to escape from this, thus avoiding discovery; and, indeed, the Hindus seemed to have no idea that a trail could be laid in that manner. Evidently, they thought their Temple of Gemini so well hidden that nobody could find it.

And, in fact, Patsy and his friends never could have found it had it not been for the rice which Nick Carter distributed along the route.

CHAPTER XI.

AT THE TEMPLE OF GEMINI.

The way was a long and wearisome one, and it was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon by the time they arrived at their destination.

In going, they had crossed the spur of one mountain, from one pass to another; thence they had traversed a narrow and winding gorge so steep that at times it was almost impossible for the horses to make the ascent.

They had gone through forests and over rocks; they had climbed steep sides of mountains, and descended places where the animals seemed almost to stand upon their heads.

But at last they had come out upon a level space in the mountains—the sort of place that a Spaniard would call *vuelta abajo*—a valley shut in by hills on every side, and in the middle of it a thick wood.

Even as they approached this wood, Nick could see the tower of a temple as it lifted its top above the trees, and he had no doubt that this was the Temple of Gemini.

"It's a curious thing," he thought, "to know that a fellow's life depends entirely upon a few handfuls of spilt rice; but that is about the condition of things at the present moment. If Patsy didn't hear that signal, it's all up with me, I think. If he did hear it, and is not prevented from following the trail I have made for him, the outlook is not so bad as it might appear to be."

They drew nearer to the trees, and presently passed among them, and here Nick discovered numerous smaller buildings, evidently used for living purposes by the worshipers at this shrine.

What particular sect these men belonged to he had no way of telling, save that they practised strangulation. He knew that much; and he knew that the old raja could not guess that any people so near to him as these were, resorted to such practises.

He was told to dismount presently, and after he had obeyed, was led through the wood toward the temple; and just beyond it he could see where the altar of sacrifice had already been erected. He saw the pit, the four posts, the platform, all of it as it had been described to him, and he knew that this had been made ready for Rena Payson.

"In a few minutes they'll be getting busy at mine," he thought, with a grim smile. "Well, I wish them joy in building it, for, on my word, I don't believe they will ever make use of it. I have too much faith in my own destiny for that. Hello! By jingo! There's another! They have got mine built already."

He stopped still in his tracks and stared, and as he did so he heard his name called out in good English voice, and, turning, he beheld Inspector Henderson standing in the doorway of one of the huts. There were two armed guards stationed near him, and by this Nick understood how thoroughly he was watched.

"Great Scott, Carter, have they got you, too?" Henderson exclaimed.

"It looks very much like it, Sandy," Nick called back to him. "I wondered what had become of you, but I had no idea that you had gotten here so much ahead of me."

He stopped and took a step or two nearer to Henderson.

son, but one of the Hindus put himself in the way and ordered him back. For answer, Nick drew his remaining empty revolver, and presented it at the man.

"Stand aside, if you don't want a hole through you," he ordered. "I wish to talk with this gentleman a moment," and the man, remembering what had happened to Sindahr, did step aside and waited.

"What, have you got a gun?" gasped Henderson.

"Yes. But there's nothing in it. It is useless, save to frighten these chaps who are with me now. The others who have gone on ahead know that I have no cartridges. How did you get here, Henderson?"

"Chiefly by making a blooming ass of myself, Carter. I saw a chap out of the window who used to be my servant when I was down here in the army. I made for him, believing that I could induce him to aid me. Well, I did. He offered to guide me if I would go with him then and there, and would go alone. I did; and he brought me here. Do you see that nice, pretty platform yonder? Well, that is for me. The one nearer you is for Mrs. Payson."

"Where is she, Henderson?"

"Over there in that hut. I have tried half a dozen times to get speech with her, but they foil me every time."

"I'll try it," said Nick.

He wheeled and started across the space that separated the two huts—a space of possibly a hundred feet; but before he had taken half a dozen steps, the same native who had tried to prevent him from conversing with Henderson stepped in his way again.

This time Nick did not stop to parley; he knocked the fellow down, and he did it so thoroughly that the man remained where he fell, quite unconscious.

Nick hurried onward, and had almost reached the doorway when two more men rushed between him and his goal. He let loose then.

He struck out with right and left, and to such purpose that both men were down and out, and the detective had reached the door, thrown it open, and stepped inside, before the others who were rushing forward could get to him.

With a loud laugh—for Nick was rather enjoying the scene now, although he knew it was a dangerous one for him—he closed the door, and, catching up a heavy bar that stood beside it, slid it into place, just as the men outside threw themselves against it. Then he turned, knowing that they could not break it down with anything short of a log of wood for a battering-ram.

"Rena," he said. "Are you here?"

For reply, he felt her soft arms around his neck and her head upon his shoulders, where she sobbed like a child, while those outside were pounding at the door.

"There, there," he said. "Calm yourself now. We haven't got much time, and I won't tell Herbert about your hugging me in this manner," and he laughed lightly, although he felt that the situation was anything but a laughing-matter. "I'll kiss you if you want me to."

"I do. Oh, Nick! Isn't it dreadful? I am so terrified. They held a sort of mass over me last night—at least, that is how it seemed to me. It was just as if I were already dead. Do you know—do you know, Nick, the awful fate they are preparing for me? Oh, are you a prisoner, too?"

"Yes. I am a prisoner, too, Rena; but the mountain passes are filled with men who are coming to our rescue, and they will get here, too, so don't you give up. I got separated from the others, that is all. Herbert and Patsy and Kairha—they are all on the track. Oh, we'll get out of this; don't you worry."

"It is set for to-morrow morning, Nick; to-morrow morning at sunrise."

"Yes. I know. But a lot can happen within that time."

"Do you really, really hope, Nick Carter?"

"Don't I talk as if I did, Rena? I'm not dead yet, and it isn't written that a lot of infernal, heathen, scoundrelly stranglers like these fellows are going to 'do' me, either. Have they treated you all right, Rena?"

"Ah, yes. As if I were an honored guest, instead of one who is condemned to die such a horrible death," and she shuddered anew.

"They have offered you no indignities of any kind?"

"Not one. Men are not even permitted to speak to me. That is why they made such a valiant effort to keep you out of here. Do you hear them calling and pounding at the door?"

"Do I *hear* them? One could almost hear them in New York. Tell me what they did with you—tell me how they got you out of your room and away from the palace, although I know something about it already."

"I had just dropped asleep, I think," she replied. "I was awakened by some one leaning over me, and I struck out fiercely with my hand. I struck a face, too, and I

heard an exclamation in a woman's voice. But at that same instant I was seized and some terrible-smelling stuff was forced under my nostrils, and that is all I remember until I found myself here."

"Then I suppose they told you why you had been brought here, didn't they?"

"Yes. Because I defiled their ruby. And then they brought in Inspector Henderson; and now you are here. Oh, it is awful, awful!"

"We will get out of it, Rena. Do they feed you well?"

"They give me the best they have, I think. As I said, I am treated as if I were a prospective bride, being fêted—perhaps fatted would be a better word—for the occasion. Isn't it dreadful for me to joke at such a time?"

"I am very glad, Rena, that you have the courage to do it."

"It is your coming that has given me courage. I was in despair until then. I had given myself up for lost."

"You are worth a lot of lost articles yet, Rena."

"But," she exclaimed, "there will be hundreds of people here, mostly men, to witness the terrible ceremonies. Even if our friends do find us, how can they hope to rescue us in the face of such odds as that?"

"There will be a way, and they will find it. You don't half-know Patsy, and you don't half-know Jack Trevanion, either."

But Rena shook her head in serious doubt.

"There will be hundreds—hundreds of men here," she said slowly. "This is some serious religious rite that they are performing, and, while they are very serious about it, they are also very determined about it. They will not be easily foiled in what they have attempted to do."

"Where force will not prevail, Rena, strategy sometimes will. You know that."

"I am afraid," she murmured; "deathly afraid. I fear that their coming will only result in there being that many more sacrifices. I fear that these men will capture them all, and that the funeral pyres will encircle the temple. Ah, Nick, give me courage if you can, for this is all put on that I am showing you now. At heart I am trembling with terror. There is horror all about me. And such a death, Nick! Such a dreadful death! If only they would stab me to the heart, or put a bullet in me before placing me on that awful platform! But no! The women will enter here first and strip me of my clothing. Then they soak sheets in a solution of alum, and those they will wind around me while they are still wet. And then I will be bound round and round like a mummy, until I cannot move, or hear, or see, until only my nostrils and lips are exposed; and then, horror of horrors, they place me on that terrible platform, and light the wood that is beneath it. Oh, Nick!"

He had permitted her to continue to the end, believing that it would relieve her, and it did seem to do so; and now he smiled at her, and replied:

"That is a very entertaining picture you draw, Rena, only you should not have referred to yourself as part of it, for I tell you again you will not be."

"You hope not, that is all. You say those things to cheer me."

"Upon my honor, Rena, I believe what I say. I see rescue in the air; I feel it in my bones—and besides, Rena, there is a long night ahead of us, and I have gotten out of tighter fixes than this in my time."

"Oh, Nick; if only you could remain here with me until—until the last!" she cried.

"I mean to do that very thing, Rena. I am here now, and they cannot get to us without battering down that door. I don't mean to open it for them, anyhow, for I see that you have food enough on that table to last a day or two."

"Hark! There is a voice calling you in English. Oh, I know. It is Sindahr, the man who brought me here."

"Yes, it is Sindahr. He is the high muck-a-muck of this push. Wait a moment. I will see what he has to say."

CHAPTER XII.

THE IDOL SPEAKS.

"Are you aware, Mr. Carter," asked Sindahr, in his perfect English, "that in forcing your way into the presence of the white woman from the West, who is being purified for the sacrifice, you have committed an offense for which you may be put to endless torture?"

"Oh, indeed! That's too bad," replied Nick. "It strikes me, Sindahr, that you had fixed up a little torture for me, anyhow, and that a degree of it more or less won't count much."

"I must ask you to unbar the door immediately and come outside at once," continued the imperturbable one, who, notwithstanding the fact that he had lost both thumbs, the lobes of both his ears, and the top of one of them, had not outwardly changed his attitude toward the

detective. Doubtless it was because he felt certain of his revenge when the flames should begin to roar around the pyre upon which he intended that Nick Carter should be placed.

"Thank you," rejoined Nick mockingly, "but I am very comfortable where I am, and so I believe I will remain here. You can come and rap us up when you are ready with those fireworks of yours in the morning, but if you try to get inside in the meantime, I only wish to remind you that I have got one of those pistols in my possession yet. It's in good condition, too; as good as it ever was."

"But you have no ammunition."

"Oh, haven't I? Well, you just monkey around that door a while and try to get in here before you're wanted, and you'll find out." He turned a smiling face to Rena, and added: "There is nothing like a good bluff, Rena. I think that one will work, too, for the fact is I haven't a cartridge to my name. It is lucky for us that these huts are of solid masonry, and are built to stand hard usage. By Jove! I believe, now that I come to look at it, that they are as old as the temple, and that is probably a thousand years; eh?"

"Yes. I think they are. This is the largest and best one of them all. It is more like a tomb than a place of habitation, and it is my belief that they were once used for tombs."

Nick had begun to look about him with some care by this time, and Rena, watching him, suddenly saw that he was evincing more than ordinary interest in his examination of the queer little place.

The interior of the place was not more than twelve feet each way, and perfectly square, and it was lighted and ventilated by narrow strips of windows that were, perhaps, two feet in length horizontally, and six inches in width perpendicularly. They were located near the ceiling, which was at least ten feet high from the floor. The door was the only modern thing about the place, but even that was very old, and made of heavy timbers, bound with wrought-iron strips.

Presently Nick began to mutter to himself; then he paced the floor, counting steps as he went; then he traversed it again in zigzag steps from corner to corner, again counting; and then he burst out suddenly:

"I know what it is now, Rena. I have heard old Professor Cadwalader, the archeologist, describe them more than once. It is one of the old Jhanizubii temples of ancient India. These little houses were not tombs; they were the dwelling-places of the priests. My dear, we are saved if I can recall the old professor's description of them."

He fell to counting and pacing again, and at last he knelt upon one of the square stones, and began to scrape it with the blade of his knife.

A moment passed, and she heard him utter an exclamation of joy, and she saw that he had uncovered a star-shaped piece of metal, set into the stone, and hitherto invisible to them on account of the gloom and the packed dust that had covered it.

He ran his knife around the edges of the star, and presently began to pry with it; and in a moment more the star came loose in his hand, disclosing an iron ring that was set in a hollow square beneath it. Instantly he seized upon the ring, and such was his strength, aided and augmented by the excitement of the moment, that he easily lifted the heavy stone from its place.

Rena uttered a little cry of delight, but he hushed her instantly. Before them, descending into impenetrable darkness, was a flight of narrow stone steps.

"Look," he told her in a low tone. "According to the professor, who told me once about these ancient temples, that passageway leads to a recess directly behind the altar in the temple. We will find an old idol there which is a mixture of a Chinese dragon and a German wild boar, as nearly as I could understand him; and there will be passages from there to each of the other houses. I think I begin to see light, Rena. Come. It lacks about two hours of darkness yet, but I think we'll chance it, just the same. Anyhow, they won't know where we have gone if they break in here, for I can fix that stone just as I found it before we descend, and then lower it into place after us. Come."

The steps led them into a subterranean passage that was ten feet or more below the surface of the ground, and, after replacing the stone, they hurried along the passage, lighting their way with matches. Then there were more steps, which they ascended, another flat stone to be lifted, and they found themselves in a square room not unlike the one they had left, only that Nick knew it to be inside the temple.

"Wait a moment," said Nick. "Every one of these square stones in this floor is the beginning of a passageway to one of the huts. Let me see if I can remember just how Henderson's prison is located. It was directly opposite yours, wasn't it? Sure. Then that stone over

there should lead to where he is. It is up to us to go after him. I think, Rena; and, besides, he's a rattling good chap to have around if there's a muss."

He raised the stone and then hurried into the passage, coming to the end of it in a very few minutes.

Nick listened for a moment to be assured that there was no talking over his head, and then he cautiously raised the stone above him.

Presently, when he could peep through the opening he had made, he saw Henderson seated with his back toward him, and he saw also that the door of the hut had been closed. He knew it would be safe to speak.

"Henderson," he said. "Shhhh! Don't make a noise. Come here. Now drop down here beside me. Don't say a word or ask questions. There isn't time for that now. Take hold of Mrs. Payson's hand. She'll guide you.....Bully!" he exclaimed a moment later when they were again in the square room behind the idol, in the temple. "Now, Rena, I forgot just one thing, and that's the grub. I'm going back after it. After that we'll have a look at the idol and see what's doing."

It was twenty minutes later when he cautiously opened the concealed door—that is, concealed from the other side—into the temple, and found that they were directly inside the idol, and that they could look out into the gloom of the ancient place without themselves running the slightest danger of being seen.

"This is the way the priests used to fool the worshipers," he explained. "They would go into the huts, and supposedly look themselves in, and presently the idol would begin to do stunts. Hello! Look there!"

A procession of robed figures was stalking solemnly into the temple—more than a hundred of them, and presently they formed a semicircle in front of the idol, and fell upon their faces, groveling. Then Sindahr stood upon his feet and called out in Hindustani:

"Oh, deity of the blood-worshipers, of which the ruby is our emblem, speak to us!" He repeated the cry three times, as if it were a formula to which they were all accustomed; and then Nick, with sudden inspiration, lifted up his voice and shrieked out through the teeth of the idol:

"Whoo-eeee—whoooo-eeeee—whooo-eeeeeeee!"

The worshipers started to their feet as with one accord. For a moment they gazed at the idol in terror, and then they broke and fled as if all the spirits of the air were after them.

And as they fled in terror toward the open door of the temple, another sound from the open air outside greeted them; but this time, although it was a sound they all knew well, it was none the less terrible in their present predicament, for it was the sound of a cavalry-bugle, giving the orders to close in and surround.

"Glory be!" exclaimed Nick. "On my life I believe there are a couple of troops of British cavalry out there. Hark! Hear them? Come on in, fellows, the water's fine!"

He dashed open the doors of the idol, and leaped out on the floor of the temple; then he helped Henderson down beside him, and with Rena leaning upon his arm, half-fainting with the joy of the moment, he strode to the doorway of the temple, and stopped under the great pillars, just as the commanding officer of the cavalry pointed with his saber toward the flying fanatics, and called out his order:

"Surround them, boys! Capture every one of them. We'll teach them to burn people at the stake like an American Indian. Hello! Who is that?" He had discovered the party of three in front of the temple, and while his men were carrying out the order he had given, he leaped from his horse and came forward; and just as he did so Patsy and all the others dashed into view.

"You see it was like this," Patsy explained a little later. "When we left the palace, the old raja got busy with the telegraph. He found out that there were two troops of cavalry at Mangapore, which is about twenty miles nearer to the mountains than we were. He sent out a courier, and the major simply burned the grass to get here. I had just picked up your scent—the gun and the rice, I mean, of course—when the major rode into town with his two troops. After that we followed the rice, and thanks to that, we weren't far behind you. Gee, this is a great place, isn't it?"

The reunion between husband and wife need not be dwelt upon; but there is one thing that is worth telling, which is that since that day of her deliverance from death by fire, Rena Payson has never worn a jewel. She disposed of the bulk of them, gave away many, and now she dislikes them as much as she used to love them.

THE END.

The next number (586) will be "The Shadow; or, Nick Carter's Mysterious Pursuer."

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This being so, it will be readily understood that the most elaborate precautions are taken to detect crime and bring the criminals to justice. And it may also be mentioned that every possible endeavor is made in the direction of preventing crime.

The methods of detection are so perfect that a postal worker who strays from the path of honesty is bound to be caught sooner or later, and although in the instances here related an enormous amount of trouble was given, the result was always the same—namely, the thief was caught.

The writer, before retiring on a pension in England, took a prominent part in over one hundred captures, but this number, of course, was spread over a considerable number of offices. Some of the cases were so difficult of solution that all ordinary methods failed, and the captures were only effected after long-sustained and patient effort.

In one case, the thefts were of money-orders. No light could be shed on the matter, as every "division" suffered alike. To-day, Derby would be the scene of the loss; a fortnight previously it was Brighton; before that, Southend suffered, and so it went on. Never the same district twice, and no clue could be obtained to point the direction of the thief. I and several colleagues had to admit ourselves beaten, but at last the puzzle was solved by an official who did confidential work only occasionally.

By careful inquiries he discovered a young letter-sorter who supported a wife and two children on a small salary. There was nothing startling in this, of course, but the astonishing thing about this man was his devotion to sport and the money he contrived to spend in pursuit of it.

The official shadowed this man, and at Richmond post-office he had just written a forged signature on a money-order when a hand was placed on his shoulder.

His plan was to slip open money-order forms which would, of course, pass through his hands in the ordinary course of his sorting operations, and, noting the destination, endeavor to find the letter containing the other portion of the advice. When he was successful he abstracted the letter, and—hence his many excursions. Five years' penal servitude was the reward of his ingenuity.

Another baffling case was that of a sorter who traveled in a railway sorting-van. This man was suspected and watched for many months, and yet contrived to elude all attempts to capture him. One night he arrived at the London terminus and found it a very wet evening. He had no ready money with him, and, rather than walk home in the wet—a considerable distance—he changed a postal order at the station post-office. He looked round very carefully, and, the coast appearing clear, he hurriedly signed the order. Although this only occupied a moment, when he turned from the desk a man slipped noiselessly into the office.

Quick as a flash the sorter put the order in his mouth and swallowed it. The official burst into a hearty laugh and congratulated the sorter on his smartness, at the same time informing him that the action was too late, as he, the official, had seen the number of the order, which he immediately quoted to him. The plain-clothes constable, who accompanied the official, then formally arrested the sorter, and the latter, fairly cornered, made a full confession.

In another case a registered-letter bag with all its contents completely disappeared. The ordinary mail-bag in which it was enclosed arrived safely at its destination, and this crime appeared impossible of solution. A week later another registered-letter bag disappeared in precisely the same remarkable manner. The second one was more valuable than the first, but such a stringent watch was being kept upon everybody who had the slightest dealings with the first missing bag that a suspicious action on the part of the postal porter who had acted as guard to the van which in each case had conveyed the missing bag to the railway-station led to his arrest.

Much of the missing property was found upon him, and he confessed fully his plan of operations.

Under the excuse of a rainy evening he had in both instances ridden inside the van—an action which is at all times strictly forbidden.

By the aid of a bicycle lamp he had heated the blade of a knife and split the seal of the outer bag. After abstracting the registered bag he had rejoined the seal by the same process, and thus left no trace of his theft. He pleaded guilty, and he also received five years.

It is gratifying to observe that thefts of letters have steadily decreased in number during the last few years; and, doubtless, the much-improved pay and conditions of postal service go far to account for this satisfactory result.

A lady, whose husband had gone out for the evening, was about to retire for the night with her infant child, when, to her amazement, she saw the foot of a man beneath her

bed. Instead of calling for assistance she coolly went to the child's cot, and sat and sang till the little one went to sleep.

For two hours she remained thus, waiting for her husband. When he returned, she said, handing him a letter: "You might run and post this." Instead of a letter, the husband found written on the envelope: "A burglar is under the bed; fetch the police."

He did as he was requested, and the man was arrested.

The house was dark, and all was still. A burglar was very busy stowing away a fine assortment of jewels and gold plate, when his blood was suddenly turned to ice by a sharp grip on his left shoulder. He turned his lantern on the figure behind him, and beheld a venerable-looking old gentleman gazing sadly upon him.

"Oh, my wayward friend," moaned the newcomer sorrowfully, "wouldst thou rob me? Turn, I beseech thee—turn from thy evil ways! Leave these stolen goods, and depart in peace, for I am merciful and forgive! Begone!"

The burglar, overcome with thankfulness, slunk swiftly off. Then the forgiving old gentleman carefully and noiselessly finished the packing, and stole softly out of the house and into the silent night. For he, too, was a burglar.

An English paper has this to say of the Pinkertons:

The late Robert Pinkerton, head of the famous detective agency, who died on a voyage across the Atlantic, was regarded as the world's greatest thief-catcher. He and his brother expanded the United States detective business to an extent of which their canny Scottish father, who founded it, never dreamed. They organized and controlled an army of men, who are used in defending property during strikes and labor wars, who have surrounded banks and large financial concerns with a system of guardianship which has made a lost art of expert safe robbery, and who protect all the big race-tracks of America from pickpockets and swindlers. As a private detective, Robert Pinkerton was the Napoleon of his profession, undoubtedly; and in many great cases of recent years his office has rendered great assistance to Scotland Yard.

A great deal of agitation has been caused among opium-smokers since the law went into effect for the closing of all opium-dens in Shanghai City, as ordered by the taotai. Taotai Jui has arranged with the Chinese Municipal Department for the establishment of an institution where employees of opium-dens may be apprenticed to some trade after the closing of the dens. The municipality has decided to purchase all opium-pipes at 20 cents each and to fix a price at which to buy other opium-smoking apparatus. The funds for this are to be raised by subscription, and Taotai Jui has subscribed $5,000 toward the fund. The owners of opium-dens who closed their business and surrendered their apparatus on the date ordered by the municipality are to receive silver medals in reward for their zeal in obeying orders.

A monkey was kept in a country squire's house, which, by reason of its vicious and mischievous tricks, was by no means a favorite; indeed, its master had more than once expressed his intention of parting with it.

One night, or, rather, early morning, the whole household was aroused from slumber by loud and repeated screams. The men servants, accompanied by their master, hastened to that part of the house from whence the shieks proceeded, which, it became apparent, was the butler's pantry. Here they found the raiser of the alarm, obviously a burglar, surrounded as he was by tools and silver. His face was covered with blood, and he presented a pitiable object.

It transpired he had gained admittance to the house by a window, forced open the silver chest, and was kneeling beside it, packing the silver, when he was suddenly pounced on from behind by the monkey. It was an unheard-of situation; the burglar, who proved to be a much-wanted man, himself raising the alarm.

"I flatter myself," said the would-be detective, "that I can tell what occupation a man follows by his walk. Now, this dignified-looking individual coming down the street is most undoubtedly a leader of men."

"That's right," rejoined the village volunteer. "He's the drum-major of our brass band."

Danish marauders used to be flayed or skinned alive in good old England in the ancient days, and their hides were nailed to church doors. Hadstock Church and Copford Church, both in Essex, have doors covered with the hides of Danes.

A MERITED FATE.

The last bale was being packed, and John Howard, foreman of the Vann's cotton-gin and mill-works, stood by the little wheel which controlled the enormous water-power from the great lake two hundred yards above.

"Heave-ho! hi-yo!" cried half a dozen sturdy fellows, rushing forward to roll the cotton from under the press-block, as it came up with a snap in response to a turn of the little wheel.

That ended the day's work, and, as the laborers turned toward their homes, with the half-song, half-shout peculiar to them, young Howard began closing the ponderous doors of the gin-house.

Luke Wright, the former foreman, had been discharged on account of his dissipated habits about two months before, and when John was given the place there were many who thought trouble would result from the change.

The young men were rivals for the hand and heart of winsome Mamie Boyle, the mill-owner's daughter, and immediately after his promotion, Howard had summoned courage to ask the momentous question.

He was accepted, and the wedding-day was now drawing near.

Luke Wright—Daredevil Luke, as he was universally called by the staid farmers of the neighborhood—became a physical wreck.

His drunken debauches and reckless behavior were soon themes of general conversation.

As John thought of his own happiness and the downward path his former rival was now treading, a feeling of pity crept into his heart, and he resolved to save the young man if possible.

"Luke has always been a little wild," he mused, closing the last of the great windows, "but his recent discharge and Mamie's rejection of his suit has rendered him desperate. He's going to the dogs about as fast as a man well can. I could easily get him another situation if he would only stop drinking, and I am inclined to think he could be induced to do this were his present peril placed before him in the right light."

At that moment the object of the young man's thoughts entered the only open doorway and came toward him.

John could see that he had been drinking again, and the wild eyes and uncertain steps indicated that it was even more than usual.

"Good evening, Luke," he exclaimed, stepping forward and shaking the young man warmly by the hand.

"Glad to see me, eh?"

And the half-drunken man grinned sardonically.

"Well, yes; it's rather lonesome here after the men all leave."

"Is that so? Then I'll try to make it interesting for you."

As he spoke, Wright grinned again, and it became evident that he meditated mischief.

Thinking to pacify him, Howard turned toward his books, and said:

"Here, Luke, I'm in a tangle, and will have to ask you to start me straight again. You were here when Major Jones' cotton was ginned, and, as the figures don't balance, I wish you'd find the error for me."

"Take that, you cur!"

The young foreman turned like a flash as the words reached his ears; but as he spun round the loaded end of a heavy cane descended on his head, and, tottering and reeling, he involuntarily staggered in the direction of the door.

Again the cane fell with crushing force on his head, and this time he sank on the floor, bleeding and insensible.

When consciousness returned, John Howard found himself tied hand and foot, and lying in what he at first thought was one of the toll-boxes.

Luke Wright, now thoroughly sober, but with an insane gleam of fury in his eyes, stood laughing and jeering above him.

"Took my place as foreman, did you? Thought you'd also get my future wife, eh? Well, I've only to spin this little wheel, as I have turned it thousands of times before, and you'll be cut into mince-meat by those delightfully keen little saws."

Then, and not until then, did John realize the full horror of his position.

It was not the toll-box in which he lay, but the feeder, or hopper, of the gin.

He struggled wildly for a few moments in a mad effort to break the stout thongs which bound him.

As he writhed and twisted, he felt the keen teeth of the saws, and realized that if they were ever started, his death would be almost instantaneous.

The blood was trickling slowly from the wound in his head, and, after shaking the matted hair from before his eyes, he looked up at Wright, and said:

"Luke, you have well-nigh killed me with that stick, but if you'll take me out of here the matter shall end, and no one ever know what has occurred to-night."

"Take you out? I rather guess not!"

"But let us reason. You intend to kill me in this horrible manner for no cause whatever. Your life will be one of misery, and, even if you succeed in escaping the gallows, a term of years in the penitentiary awaits you."

"Don't fret, my dear boy!" exclaimed the villain.

And, reaching forward, he clasped the wheel.

Before turning it, however, he leaned downward, and said:

"Probably it would be interesting to you for me to say that, although a little intoxicated, I took particular pains to let no one see me enter here. Rest assured I shall reform and make Mamie a good husband."

As he moved backward, his foot caught in a roll of bagging, and he was pitched head first into the yawning mouth of the cotton-press.

Even as he disappeared, the gin-house shook with the force of the oncoming water, the belts began to run, and the huge press-block dropped into place.

As John Howard saw Luke Wright fall into the press, and the block-drop across the opening, he knew that he was saved, and that the would-be murderer was doomed to even a more terrible death than he had intended for his victim.

The last bale of cotton had been packed before closing the gin that night, and the enormous water-wheel was connected with the press instead of the gin-machinery.

As the block sank with its awful regularity into the wretch's prison, John could hear smothered oaths, curses, and prayers following each other in rapid succession.

The noble-hearted young fellow once more made an effort to free himself, that he might go to the dying man's rescue, and, although his struggles were fruitless, he never ceased his efforts until the block flew back again, telling that all was over.

Half an hour later, several of the mill-hands, attracted by the roaring water, appeared on the scene, and found the press-block still going back and forth over the shapeless mass in the box.

Young Howard was quickly liberated, and when his story was told there were none present who thought Luke Wright's fate undeserved.

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